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THE ART OF LIVING
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A TIME FOR SILENCE

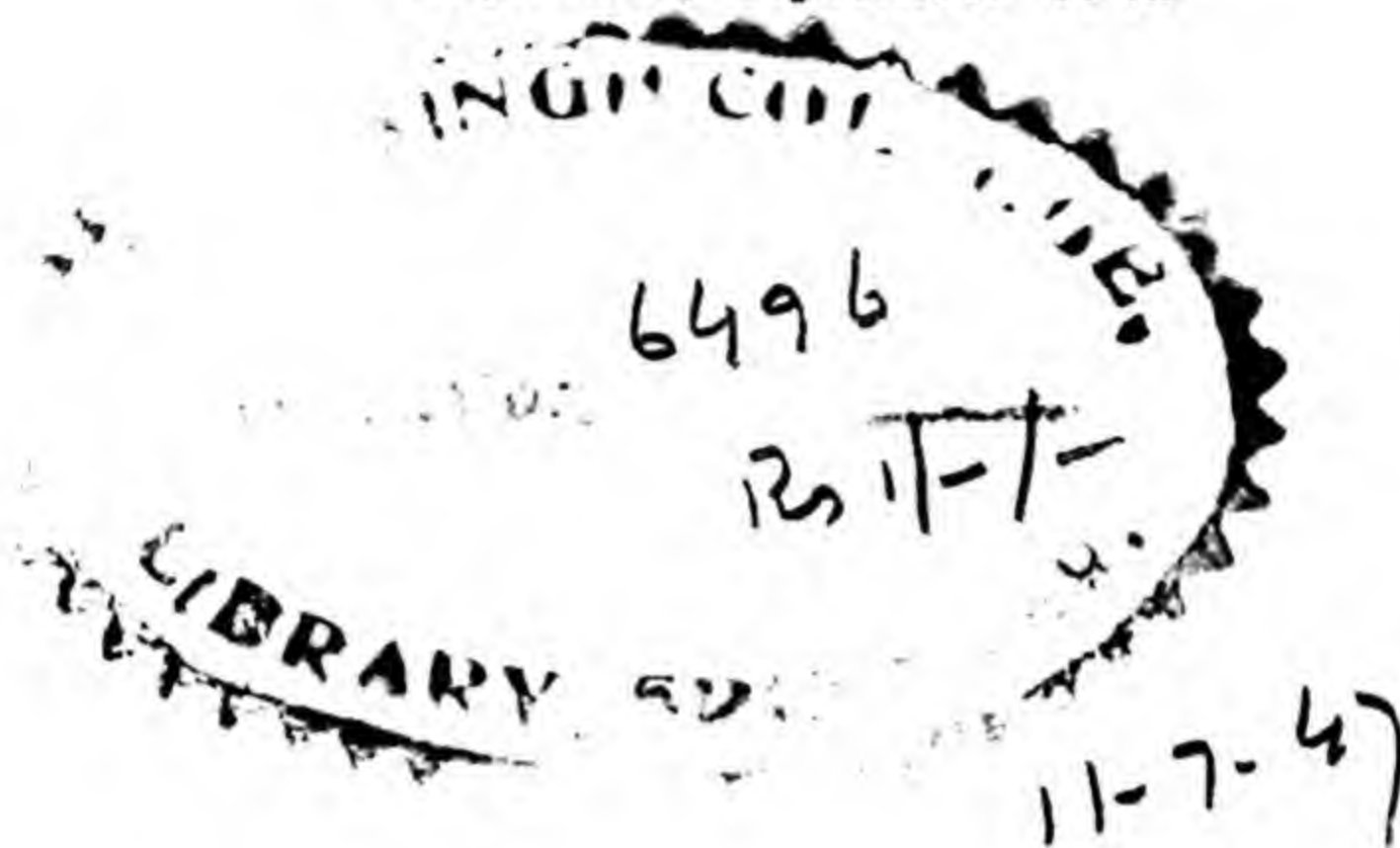
ANDRÉ
MAUROIS

Translated by
EDITH JOHANNSEN

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*The names of all characters used in this book
are purely fictitious. If the name of any
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"NO, YOU HAVEN'T any fever," she said.

A man of about fifty lay in a large, turreted room of a somewhat irregular shape. A woman, already dressed for the day even though it was still very early, was standing between the two beds reading the thermometer. Her face was gentle, with even features, and despite the greying hair around her temples, youthful in expression.

"Ninety-nine," she said. "It's nothing very serious. Do you have any pains?"

"No, not any more."

"What was the matter?"

"I was awakened by a slight pain near my heart. Then it seemed to get worse and I called you. It's gone now."

"Do you want me to send for Dr. Toury?"

"There's no need of that, Valentine. It's really gone. Just a false alarm."

"Well, promise me to stay in bed this morning."

"It's a shame . . . on such a lovely day."

Through the open window a meadow could be seen sloping down to the river. Then, on the other side, the moor, dotted with heather, rose as far as the Brouillac farm. To the left, a pool of water reflected the willows and birch trees. To the right, forested hills stretched out as far as the eye could see; close by they were green and it was possible to distinguish chestnuts and oak trees; farther on they shaded into blue and in the distance, near Périgueux, they were grey, transparent, paralleling the horizon like evening mists. From this high ridge could be seen a good part of the Dordogne and the vast countryside where clustered tiny farms with their violet-coloured

roofs, châteaux with white towers, churches whose steeples alone pierced the tree-tops; all these seemed to emphasize the intense quiet which hung over the still sleeping province, a silence broken by no sound except, here and there, the song of the oriole, or a cock's crowing, and the soft, almost imperceptible, but incessant murmur of the threshing machine.

Once again Gaston Romilly breathed deeply of the morning air, then looked up at his wife. She had made the other bed and hung up the clothes, and the chamber had assumed the rather unsettled appearance of a sick-room. The contrast was too sharp between the orderliness of the objects, Valentine's light dress, and the unusual presence of the man lying there.

"I still have a cramp in my neck and shoulders," he said.

She almost replied that he had stayed out too long in the night air the previous evening. That walk that he had taken after dinner alone with Colette annoyed Valentine, but she immediately stifled the thought. Surely she wasn't jealous? Of her own daughter? She shook her head as if to rid herself of such an absurd idea. Valentine was too active for such a memory to take any hold on her. She busied herself with setting out before her husband the things he would need to shave in bed, gave him his morning paper and, a little later, his breakfast. Then she went out, in his stead, to inspect the dairies, the stables, and the kitchen gardens. About nine o'clock she saw the overseer, Roubinet, and talked over the sale of a calf, some framework that needed repairing, and at last returned to Gaston's room to tell him the news.

"Well, this is how things stand," she said. "A little less milk because of the heat. Yesterday we had only

forty-one gallons . . . Sarasana and Vigier did not come to work."

"How many sacks of wheat?"

"Roubinet doesn't know yet."

"He never knows anything."

"What do you expect? He's getting old. But he's a steady man."

Valentine, who had been born in this part of the country, always used certain French words in their Périgordian connotation: "steady" for her meant "good and honest." When she mentioned that a member of her numerous family was "very tired" her husband knew that she was expecting an early death. He had always been glad that the many years which she had spent in Paris had not completely glossed over the peculiarities of her childhood language. Often a phrase of hers seemed to spring directly from some calm, earthy wisdom.

"Where is Colette?" he asked. "Is she back yet from her fishing party?"

"Not yet, but it's still early."

"Did she go with young Saviniac?"

"Yes," said Valentine. "I heard the car about four this morning."

Romilly said nothing for a moment, but lay scribbling little hexagons in the margin of the paper which was on his knees.

"Don't you think it a little dangerous to let Colette go out alone like that in the middle of the night with a young man?"

"Why? She's known André for over ten years and nowadays nearly every girl has the same freedom. I don't know whether it's wrong or not. At any rate, what could possibly happen? And if something did

happen, do you think even the strictest supervision would prevent it? ”

“ Certainly. My sisters, at Pont-de-l'Eure, even if they had wanted to, wouldn't have had the slightest opportunity to do anything wrong. They were never alone, my mother or the governess took turns being with them.”

“ And what was the result? ” she demanded. “. . . It's much better to run the risk of a few kisses before marriage, for they at least leave some memories.”

“. . . or some regrets.”

He sniffed at the tang of the vinegarish cologne which she was using to freshen the room.

“ How can you be so sure that these young men stop at innocent kisses? When I listened to them last summer there at the beach, I was startled by their cynicism.”

“ André de Saviniac wasn't in that group. I am sure he is quite different.”

“ He's the same generation; and then, too, André is one young man whom Colette could never, in any circumstances, hope to marry, and that makes it . . . ”

He stopped short in the middle of his sentence. Colette had just entered. She looked very like her mother; her sharp elbows, her thin shoulders, her rapid movements, were those of a child, but her face, which had long been restless, had taken on in the last year the same expression of calm eagerness which was a great part of Valentine's charm. Gaston Romilly was always visibly moved at the appearance of his daughter. He loved the way she walked, her gestures, her delicate but determined chin, her logical mind, curious and unemotional. “ Colette is not tender,” Valentine was accustomed to say. “ You might say, rather, that she is not sentimental,” her husband would reply. “ So much the better . . . she will suffer less.”

"Well, hello! Why are you in bed?" asked Colette, catching sight of the patient.

"Your father caught a cold last night," answered Valentine in a slightly reproachful tone.

"Yes, it could be," said Colette, "it was a bit chilly under the sycamores." Her voice was precise and very pleasant but still had a curious quality to it.

"Well, how was your fishing trip?" asked Gaston.

A little unsure of himself in her presence, he always addressed her in questions, a habit common to parents, sovereigns, generals, and teachers. She usually answered very briefly, especially when her mother was present. This time, however, she grew quite lively as she described Mme de Saviniac and her sons.

"Their mother is simply amazing. She doesn't belong to this age. . . . Everything she says seems to come out of a novel, and a very old novel at that. . . . She rolls her 'R's.' . . . Her sons adore her, but they can't help smiling at her. . . ."

"Did you have breakfast on the lawn?"

"Oh, yes. . . . They live so simply, the Saviniacs. Almost like peasants. It's awfully sweet."

"But we live simply, too."

"Oh, yes, but it's not the same thing."

She glanced at her wrist-watch.

"Have I five minutes before lunch? Good, I'm going to run out to the farm. . . . Roubinet wants me to see his dog . . . the poor thing's been bitten again. It's awful!"

Her father's eyes followed her as she left the room. She had been his pupil and knew the whole estate as well as he did himself. She knew more than the overseer about the tenants, their wishes, and their complaints. Thérèse, the daughter at the Vauzelles farm, had long

been her most intimate friend. The peasants said that Mlle Colette had a "lucky eye," and before a fair they would bring their animals to her for good luck.

"Have you noticed the vocabulary that Colette has picked up?" Romilly asked his wife. "Everything is *amazing, awful*. . . . What is it, the influence of those boys?"

"She's at that age," replied Valentine, "when youngsters are attracted by anything new and different. . . . You're silly to be afraid of the young Saviniac boys. . . . You'd like them. . . . You'll meet them this evening, at the tea at la Guichardie."

"I'm not going to the tea at la Guichardie. . . . No, indeed! If I am to be treated like an invalid, at least let me escape that bore."

"Do what you want, of course," she said. "The only thing is, I shall have to leave you alone for an hour or two. I must go with Colette to this tea."

"Of course, Valentine. . . . Stay three hours, if you want. . . . I have the dairy accounts. . . . I'll work on them while I wait for you to come back, and if I feel better I'll try to get up and take a look at the threshing up at Bruyères."

Valentine perched on the ~~edge~~ of the bed in a movement of youthful agility that was utterly charming. Her husband took her hand and looked at her happily. They loved to be alone and to talk for hours on end about things whose very repetition and monotony were their delight. The character of their daughter was one of their favourite themes. Roubinet, the overseer of the estate, was another whose possibilities were equally as inviting. The third was Valentine's family, a curious tribe of cousins who were always having to be saved from seizure, from the poor-house, or from the courts.

The fourth was the quarrel with the Romillys of Pont-de-l'Eure, a quarrel which seemed destined never to be reconciled in spite of the death of Gaston's father, Déodat Romilly.

Long before now the two of them had said everything there was to say about all of these subjects, but they were like those amateurs of music who would infinitely rather listen to the opera or symphony which they know by heart, or like the true book lover who reads with much more pleasure the novel whose dénouement he already knows, so that, with a freer mind, he can savour the details fully. In this way Gaston and Valentine were like many happy couples, loving the comfortable security of their most familiar conversations. However, about four o'clock Valentine, who had eaten her lunch from a little table beside her husband's bed, was forced to renounce the agreeable prospect of affirming for the two thousandth time that they would some day have to replace Roubinet. The moment had come when she was due at the tea at la Guichardie, and it was inconceivable that the Romillys could be absent for even one Thursday from this ceremony which enjoyed such prestige in the eyes of the landowners of the vicinity.

2

PÉRIGORD IS ONE of the most beautiful provinces in France, but unfortunately, few people know it very well. It is remarkable not only for the variety and extent of the countryside, but also for the survival of a society entirely different from those lying north of the Loire and

east of the Central Plateau. Except for the roads, which are more numerous and extensive today, the country has changed very little in the last three centuries. The region is dotted with lovely châteaux, with their round towers, their steep slate roofs, their mullioned windows; and often, on the nearby river, one can see their more or less dilapidated forges which produced cannon for the royal navy at the time of Louis XIV. Even now it is the noble families of Périgord who live in most of these old homes. True, at the time of the Revolution a few of these properties were bought by notaries with liquid assets, or by peasants who had some actual cash, or even, much later, by families like the Romillys who came from other provinces. For the most part, however, these new landowners were gradually assimilated into the country nobility whose attitudes, prejudices, and habits they soon adopted. *of*

The château is usually connected with an estate which the master (or as he is called in this region, the "moussur") rarely exploits in its entirety. It is nearly always divided into two parts: the reserve, cultivated directly by the owner, and the farms. The tenant system, long since abandoned in the richer sections of the country, is necessary in Périgord because with it the farmer need not have any capital. The master is expected to furnish him with his house, his tools, and his cattle; the produce is divided in half. When the farmer arrives and again when he leaves, he and the "moussur" take an inventory of the livestock and the farmer has a right to half of the surplus.

There, as everywhere in France, the peasant is indefatigable and thrifty, but in Périgord he remains true to a type which no longer exists in the other provinces. After buying Preyssac in 1918, Romilly, who had been

accustomed to dealing with the workmen of Normandy, wanted to rebuild some of the farms. To his surprise he was confronted with more resistance than gratitude. "Oh, no, moussur," an old woman had complained. "If you build us houses where the men will be warm, we'll never get them to go out and work." A small building on which he had planned to have a pretty little porch a few steps high brought the men to him grumbling that "there'll be no way for the chickens to get into the room." And one can find this same attitude in many a landowner of the region who would sooner die of the cold than spoil his mellow walls with radiators or steam-pipes.

Because of this strong love of rusticity, Périgord weathered the post-war crisis with less misery than other French provinces did. It is protected from the ills of modern civilization because it repudiates her inventions. Satisfied with its spirit, its destiny, its climate, it is like an island of traditions which does not recognize the laws of the capital. This small closed society judges by its own standards all reputations, all values, and all marriages. The greatest names of Paris are accepted only after being submitted to a Périgordian inventory. Its social directors are the men and particularly the women of the region, among whom the most famous is Madame de La Guichardie.

In a province where birth, land, and money are still all-powerful, it is easy to understand the prestige of Madame de La Guichardie, who was a member of the Chaulieu family, and who owned a single piece of land four thousand acres in extent, as well as four houses in Paris. She was the widow of La Guichardie, who had been the deputy from the Dordogne for thirty years. Indeed, he was finally beaten only when this region,

like a large part of France, turned radical. The young lawyer Monteix now represented the constituents of la Guichardie. "The châteaux have no more electoral influence," Monteix insisted, and he was right. Nevertheless, these sorely scorned châteaux still basked in a certain grandeur. The villagers might vote for Monteix, but they looked with pride to the network of small estates which graced their country.

During the long parliamentary life of her husband, Madame de La Guichardie had lived in Paris, but at the same time she had looked after her Périgordian interests with great care. Now, feeling the weight of her years, and easily tired by travelling, she had not left her beautiful château since the war. From the crest of the hill she ruled over the countryside where her judgments were accepted as law. The priests feared her because she invited the bishop to dinner, and the petty officials because she knew the cabinet ministers in Paris. A newcomer was admitted to Périgordian society according to the decree of the sovereign. She was at once an admirable friend and a fearsome enemy, and her choice between these two positions was utterly unpredictable and invariably determined by some insignificant incident.

For example, she had adopted the Romillys from the moment they had bought Preyssac, because Romilly, who had been introduced to her by a mutual friend, had consulted her about buying an estate and had followed her advice. She would have been severe, and possibly even pitiless, toward a newcomer if she had not found him docile. By taking her advice and restoring a castle which was very dear to this region, the Romillys had satisfied both her love of authority and her Périgordian patriotism. They had become protégés at once and were soon her friends. Her patronage had been of

untold consequence, for they were complete strangers and at the time of their arrival they had known no one. From the first the most exclusive homes were open to them. Madame de La Guichardie liked them; they had restored Preyssac, one of the loveliest estates of the region, and they looked after it like real gentry. In a few months Périgord had adopted this faultless couple.

For the last two years Madame de La Guichardie had extended her benevolence to Colette, and there again it was a small incident that had brought about important developments. One day about four o'clock the old lady had dropped in unannounced at Preyssac to get some information about a second gardener. Valentine had begged her indulgence for the mediocre tea which she would have to improvise, for "there wasn't a thing in the house." To anyone who knew the savoury repasts served at la Guichardie, and who was aware of the prodigious esteem accorded questions of food in all classes of Périgordian society, this was clearly a domestic crisis. Colette, who had silently disappeared upon the arrival of the guest, had returned three-quarters of an hour later with a plate filled with little cakes which she had prepared herself. From that day onward, no one could mention Colette's name in the presence of Madame de La Guichardie without the latter's beginning, "Little Colette Romilly? . . . A treasure! Why, do you know, one day I arrived at Preyssac . . ." It is characteristic of the great to attach such importance to their own persons that even the smallest service which is rendered them assumes universal value in their eyes. One had the impression—and probably a very exact one—that if Madame de La Guichardie were to live to be a hundred she would never forget this episode. From

then on Colette was the pet of la Guichardie and was treated like the daughter of the house.

In 1928, when this story begins, Madame de La Guichardie was a woman of sixty, impressive and masculine. She always wore black velvet for winter, grey or violet silk for summer, and her person was surmounted by an extraordinary edifice of curls which must have been a wig. In her hand she invariably carried a gold-handled cane and held on to it even when she sat down in one of her high-backed Gothic chairs in which she took such delight. This cane, her fan, and her lorgnette—three objects which were indispensable to her peace of mind—composed a rebellious company across her lap, and brought all conversation to a standstill every time they slipped off. This conversation was truly remarkable. Madame de La Guichardie was possessed of a great admiration for the grandes dames of the eighteenth century and considered herself their intellectual heir, with the result that she spoke, not in the words of Madame du Deffand or Madame d'Epinay, but as she believed they had spoken. Thus there was in her a mixture of ostentation, authority, affectation, and real kindness. Valentine Romilly, who was utterly without pretensions, found this all highly amusing.

3

AT FOUR O'CLOCK the cars were already lined up in the courtyard of la Guichardie. Everyone came early, because the young people wanted to play tennis and their parents were looking forward to their game of

bridge. The Saviniacs had arrived first with their three sons. They lived at Breuilh only during the summer, for the boys were studying in Paris where the elder Saviniac, who was an engineer, headed several administrative councils. Because he had been wise enough to remain Périgordian in conduct and in temperament, he had been a success in the financial circles of Paris, where his peasant's caution had served him well. He was a tempestuous man, and not a little feared by his children and his wife, the latter a pious and lovable person. The elderly Madame Marcenat had come from Gandumas. With her she had brought Isabelle Schmitt (who had formerly been Madame Philippe Marcenat and who had remained very friendly with her mother-in-law after her subsequent marriage to Bertrand Schmitt, the novelist) and her grandson, Alain Marcenat, a lad of six.

Madame de La Guichardie, her cane striking on the tiles, wandered from one group to another, insisting that everyone ate heartily, for her pride lay in hearing all Périgord admit that her cream was the best cream, her tarts the best tarts, and her currants the best currants in the world.

The three Saviniac boys were only too happy to do her bidding and stuff themselves, but they showed even more joy when Madame Romilly and her daughter arrived about five.

"Well? Well?" cried Madame de La Guichardie. "And so my little Colette isn't going to come and serve tea any more? . . . It's too bad, because I really need her. . . . Now here are three young fellows who refuse everything I offer them. . . . What? . . . Nonsense! You're just spoiled. . . . At least you, Colette, who know so much about cream, surely you'll taste my rum

cakes and tell me what you think of *my* cream. . . . What's that? . . . You don't like to eat before you play tennis? . . . Poppy-cock! Rubbish! You're supposed to be a good example."

Valentine explained that they were late because her husband was not well. Everyone was immediately full of sympathy for poor Romilly, and while the elders were talking, the young people escaped to their tennis. Madame de La Guichardie was looking out of the window and saw André de Saviniac running along, arm linked with Colette's.

"A handsome couple," she remarked as she turned back to her guests.

All Périgord trembled. Madame de La Guichardie never spoke without good reason; her will was indomitable, her wisdom proverbial and her power infinite. Madame de Saviniac, flustered, lowered her eyes and breathed more rapidly. Valentine blushed, and seeing a plate of biscuits before her, suddenly started to eat as though she were famished.

"A handsome couple." The three words went round the dining-room, flew towards the salon, and reached the bridge players.

"Who said 'A handsome couple'? " asked Saviniac.

"Madame de La Guichardie," replied his partner.

"And whom was she speaking about? "

"About your son André and Colette Romilly."

"Oh, really! " Monsieur de Saviniac considered his hand very attentively. "And what would you say to three spades? "

On the terrace, where the smokers had retired, the conversation had turned to the question which was worrying the country at that time: the exodus of the farmers. Applying the clause in their contract which

permitted them to demand an inventory at the end of the year and their share of the profits, the farmers were taking advantage of the low value of the farms and the high value of livestock and were breaking their agreements at this favourable moment. The situation was disastrous for the proprietors. Cattle which had been worth six thousand francs in 1905 were now worth fifty thousand. Were they going to be forced to pay the farmers plus values which they had not earned, and which few landowners possessed in liquid assets?

"Good heavens! What can you do about it?" demanded Colonel de Sermaize, who was rather new to Périgord.

"We'll take it to court, Colonel, but if we lose . . . As for myself, if I have to pay out half of the present value of livestock to my six farmers I'll be ruined. . . ."

At this moment "A handsome couple" struck the terrace and the Colonel, who had four ill-favoured daughters to marry off, suddenly looked gloomy.

Madame de La Guichardie had borne off gentle Madame de Saviniac: "Come along, let's go take a look at the tennis players."

Then, the minute they had reached the cedars and were out of earshot of the others, she launched her attack:

"My dear Anne," she began, "have you by any chance noticed my little friend Colette Romilly?"

"Yes," was the murmured reply, in Madame de Saviniac's dove-like, fluttering voice. "She is charming . . . modest. . . . We took her fishing with us this morning. . . ."

"She's an extraordinary child," declared Madame de La Guichardie. "She has everything in her favour: she's very pretty, she's always in good spirits, she'll

make a fine housewife. . . . Why, do you know, one day I arrived unexpectedly at Preyssac about tea-time. . . . Valentine was full of excuses. . . . 'There wasn't a thing in the house!' . . . and that child, sitting in her corner, said nothing, but suddenly disappeared. . . ."

There followed the account of Colette's memorable deed.

Inside, Valentine was talking with Isabelle Schmitt, the novelist's wife. Although Valentine never longed for Paris nor for her former life, she still enjoyed talking with others who moved outside the delightful but nonetheless limited world of Périgord.

"Your daughter has grown up to be very beautiful," Isabelle said. . . . "You must let me introduce her to my husband. . . . Bertrand is always complaining that he never meets young girls of her age. Colette seems to be a model of what they should be. . . . She is neither bashful nor forward. . . . She is just right, in mind as well as in body. . . . Just to see her alive is a pleasure. . . . Where was she educated?"

"At home," replied Valentine. "We didn't want her to be away from us; we had an intelligent governess to teach her French and history, and my husband himself undertook her scientific education. . . . She found that very interesting."

"Does she have her degree?"

"No," said Valentine, imperceptibly irritated. "What's the point of a young girl having a diploma?"

Through the open window they could see Madame de La Guichardie and Madame de Saviniac coming along the path from the terrace; the old lady was speaking emphatically and the other, her head bowed, seemed to acquiesce. A little later, Madame de Saviniac sat down beside Isabelle and started to talk about her husband's

books. Madame de La Guichardie led Valentine away.

"You haven't eaten a thing, Valentine," she cried. "Come along with me, my dear; you simply must taste our savarin. It's a recipe of Virginia's. . . . What? You're not hungry? . . . Well, you'll just have to go without dinner, that's all."

But the rum cake was obviously only a pretext, for as soon as the two women reached the now empty dining-room it was not mentioned again.

4

"MY DEAR VALENTINE," began Madame de La Guichardie, "I have something very important to say to you. . . . You know how interested I have always been in you. . . . Oh, I remember very well how good you were when I had that trouble with my legs. . . . I never forget anything; it was probably your attentions that saved my life. . . . Poppycok . . . I say so because I think so. . . . But today I feel as though I shall be able to repay all your kindnesses by providing for Colette's happiness."

"Colette?" said Valentine, suddenly annoyed. . . . "But Colette is only eighteen."

"Stuff and nonsense! . . . Colette is a woman," objected Madame de La Guichardie in her most authoritative tones. "Listen to me, Valentine. You may think I am getting to the point too quickly, but I think you would make a mistake by not grabbing the chance before you. . . . André de Saviniac is madly in love with your daughter."

Valentine jumped, startled.

"André? . . . Why, how old is André? . . . Twenty-two? Twenty-three? . . . Good heavens! These child marriages always end unhappily."

"Now look here, Valentine," said Madame de La Guichardie. "I have arranged fifty-three marriages in Périgord . . . yes, fifty-three. And of the lot, I have had two divorces and one annulment . . . that's a pretty good score. What? . . . Nonsense. . . . I repeat, you'd be wrong to let this chance slip through your fingers, and if Gaston were here I'd tell him just as I'm telling you. Naturally, I would not have spoken so soon if the Saviniacs lived here all year around, but you know as well as I do that they are going back to Paris next month. . . ."

"The Saviniacs would want a titled girl for their son," said Valentine.

"My dear," said Madame de La Guichardie, "I have discussed that with Xavier several times. He is much too intelligent and modern to attach any importance to birth where a woman is concerned. . . . If he had a *daughter* to marry off, it would be a different matter. . . . A son gives *his* name. . . . Anne might be a bit more difficult to handle; she's a Breton. But fortunately she's very sentimental, and I can always get her on that score. . . . Naturally Xavier will demand a good match for his eldest son. But Colette is rich. What do you plan to give her? "

Valentine looked unhappy and embarrassed.

"I think," she murmured, "that it was Gaston's intention to give her the Brouillac farm and house, or, if she marries a man who already has his own land, a cash settlement."

"A cash settlement . . . But how much? " insisted

Madame de La Guichardie impatiently. "If you want André de Saviniac you can't quibble, for his parents are giving him Breuilh. . . . Anne just told me so. . . . They've sent him to the Agricultural Institute so that he will know how to manage his property himself. . . . As soon as he finishes his military service and his studies, he will have the land and his parents will let him have all it brings in. . . . They will expect to have chickens, eggs, and vegetables sent to them twice a week in Paris. Also, they will want to be able to come and spend their vacations at Breuilh with the young couple, which is only right. . . . Remember, Breuilh should bring in about a hundred thousand francs a year if it is well managed. As it is, the four farms are worth sixty thousand, whether it's a good year or a bad one. . . . As a matter of fact—just between ourselves—I am sure that Xavier will accept whatever you offer, because he likes Colette. What's a dowry to them? They're so very rich." *Richer than we are*

"The Saviniacs? You'd never guess it."

"My dear child," said Madame de La Guichardie, "I have told you dozens of times that you're such a child in these things. . . . You judge a person's fortune by the way he lives. . . . But perhaps you didn't know that the Saviniacs are one of the several families in this country who have lived for three or four generations, not on their income, but on the income from their income. . . . The Saviniacs have Suez stock that they bought at five hundred francs a share. . . . And besides, they have Aunt Fournigue. . . . Haven't you ever heard of Aunt Fournigue? . . . Well, she's at least ninety. She lives in Neuilly, in a villa which was once her family's country home. The park is about ten acres and she raises fruit and vegetables. Think of it, pro-

perty which is worth six hundred francs a square foot! Old Aunt Fournigue has had at least twenty offers for her park. . . . But no . . . She wants to raise gooseberries and potatoes at Neuilly, and wants to gather her fire-wood on land that is worth six hundred francs a square foot. . . . Understand, I don't blame her. . . . It's certainly her right . . . But some day that will all come to the three Saviniac boys. . . . So you can see that you don't need to worry on that score."

"But Colette isn't interested in money," said Valentine. "She'll never consent to a prearranged marriage."

"Colette?" said Madame de La Guichardie. "If you had seen her as I did just now, sitting next to André, wiping his forehead and making him eat some plums, you wouldn't be so doubtful about her feelings. . . . Of course, you're not going to talk to her about the financial end of it. . . . Youngsters are inclined to be offended by such thoughts. . . . Although they are happy enough to have a warm home and to find life fairly easy for them. . . . Yes, I know . . . You have to take things as they are. . . ."

Valentine remembered the sympathy with which her daughter had described the Saviniac family, and she felt that Madame de La Guichardie was not mistaken in believing that Colette was in love with André. But the fear of some distant and mysterious obstacle seemed to hang over Valentine's spirit, because far from showing approval or pleasure, she only murmured in a discouraged tone of voice:

"I can't say one way or the other . . . I must talk it over with Gaston."

"Yes . . . But don't look like that when you talk it over with him," retorted Madame de La Guichardie, who felt somewhat rebuffed to see her plan receive so

little enthusiasm. "After all, what do you want, Valentine? Here I am offering you one of the best matches in Périgord and you sniff at it. . . . Look, since Gaston is in bed, I'll come down to Preyssac tomorrow myself and be my own messenger."

"Oh, he'll be up tomorrow," Valentine assured her, embarrassed.

"Well, up or not, he'll receive me, don't you think? "

And Madame de La Guichardie, refusing to listen to any more criticism against a project which she thought perfect in every detail, got up to join her guests.

5

AS THE VISITORS left la Guichardie they found themselves unconsciously stopping to admire the château. Although it is not as famous as Chambord or Chenonceaux among the tourist trade, many artists think it much finer. What is it that lends such charm to la Guichardie that travellers invariably turn to their train windows to catch a glimpse of it as they speed through Périgord, and then watch it until its imposing and graceful mass fades in the distance? Perhaps it is the perfection of its site, for never was a manor more ideally situated in the centre of a vast plain, which it dominates with a truly seignorial air; perhaps also the complex harmony between the elegant wing built by Marie de La Guichardie about 1630 and the two massive towers, which are the only remains from the period of Bertrand de La Guichardie, companion to the Plantagenets.

The road from Brive to Preyssac winds around the

château for several miles, and each turn offers a new and surprising aspect. Sometimes the towers surmounting the two identical slate cupolas seem to flank the Louis XIII building, whose wings they mask; then, as the eye moves past, the towers seem to slip in parallel formation to the uttermost depths of the observer's vision. One of them takes up its position at the centre of the façade and the other at a continuation of it, revealing at the same time the square wings which link them to the main section. The road turns again. For a moment la Guichardie is completely veiled by a wood covering the western slope of the hill. Suddenly it reappears; but this time the towers are invisible and the astonished traveller sees only a handsome three-wing château, in the Louis XIII manner, made of granite and bathed in a rosy glow at sunset.

Valentine dreamily contemplated this spectacle which she had often admired, and from time to time glanced somewhat anxiously at Colette's face. The girl seemed calm and happy. When finally la Guichardie disappeared from the horizon she turned toward her mother as though expecting a question.

"Well," said Valentine with some effort, "how was your tennis?"

"Simply glorious!" exclaimed Colette enthusiastically. "André plays like a god!"

"Colette, what an expression!"

"It's true, Mother . . . he plays divinely. All his balls are well placed, he has a smashing service. . . . Well, look, it's perfectly obvious . . . we were partners and I certainly wasn't in good form, yet we beat his brothers six-two, six-one, and six-four."

"And outside of tennis, what does he talk about?"

"Who, André? Well, goodness, what do you think?"

Naturally, since he has been at Aggie, we talked about farming, cattle . . . he's taught me a lot. But he's interested in other things too—music, books . . . Oh, everything! ”

“ And his brothers? ”

“ Well, they're terribly nice, but André is by far the most interesting. He has travelled, he's more mature.”

“ ‘ Mature,’ ” thought Valentine, “ ‘ divinely.’ Gaston is right; where on earth has Colette picked up this vocabulary? Up to last year she was hardly out of the house.”

She fell back into her reverie and did not speak until the car turned up the drive to Preyssac.

“ I do hope we won't find your father worse.”

“ Dad? ” asked Colette. “ He's all right. He only thinks he's ill. As for me, every time he complains I laugh at him, just on general principle. That cures him right off.”

“ How hard you are, Colette! ”

“ No, it's just that I see things as they are.”

Valentine sighed and said no more.

6

ROMILLY GOT UP after the two women left. The pain which he had had earlier in the day had not returned. He was eager to go up to the Bruyères farm and make sure that Roubinet had followed his instructions and was keeping the Puyeff wheat apart from the rest. He had had the Puyeff field sown with a new variety of wheat, bought at a very high price; it was his plan to keep its

entire yield for next season's sowing, because in this hard soil the local grains soon lost their strength.

He felt better as soon as he was up. The dogs rushed at him the moment he appeared on the threshold.

"Hello there, Luronne! Anything wrong? You haven't been bitten again, have you?"

There were a good many snakes on the estate, and Romilly had as great a horror of snakebites for his dogs as he had of fevers for himself. But Luronne was full of energy and raced off toward the farm. From time to time she would stop to make sure that her master was following. As he walked along under the bright sunlight toward the Bruyères farm, Romilly laughed at his own imagination.

"How many times haven't I thought I was at death's door when it was really all so simple. And yet, some day it will be true. Every morning thousands of men and women wake up and recognize in themselves the symptoms of a mortal illness. They look in the mirror and see their mouth twisted in pain, or a suspicious swelling. They think: 'Well, it looks as though I'm a goner,' and in fact they are."

He stopped to investigate a pile of broken branches.

"Well, well, Roubinet was right. There has been a boar around here. We'll have to go after him before we harvest the potatoes."

Then he went on with his stroll and his meditation. "Death? Does a person ever know when he is dying? It shouldn't be too hard." The strangest thing was that he had not the slightest fear of death. He had had his life, a rather dull childhood, a period of almost unbearable misery, and then this long happiness whose perfection nothing threatened. "Nothing? Can we ever really be sure?" Like every man who has suffered

deeply he always expected the future to hide the shadow of some still unknown sorrow.

The summer had been so dry that the fields in the Bruyères valley showed very little grass. He noticed a flock of sheep with heads lowered to the ground as they sought pasturage in the parched soil.

"Not a blade of grass," thought Romilly. "And the radishes are burned too. Whatever shall we feed the poor beasts this winter?"

The sound of the motor grew more insistent. Gaston was nearing the Bruyères farm. The courtyard was filled with guinea-fowl, very solemn in their black and white feathers, and looking for all the world like an orchestra returning to its music stands. The men were passing the wheat over to the thresher, and the yellow grain poured into the sacks hung on its flanks. The funny little machine stood there with its copper work all dusty and its stiff round stackpipe outlined against the sky. The mechanic who rented it out was quite a character, with his hollow cheeks and his beret, and his long moustaches which bore an unmistakable resemblance to a circumflex accent. He was leaning over the thresher and was the first to catch sight of Romilly.

"Look, there's your moussur," he cried to the Bruyères farmers.

"Good afternoon, Uncle Simeon," said Gaston. "Any trouble this time? The plugs didn't heat up again, did they?"

"No, Monsieur Romilly."

Taking off his broad-brimmed straw hat, the overseer came forward. He was dripping with perspiration, but he seemed satisfied.

"We'll have good bread this winter, Monsieur. The

wheat is nice and clean. . . . And it's a fine, heavy grain, too."

"Have you sampled it, Roubinet?"

"Yes, sir. It's more than seventy-seven. We haven't seen that for years."

The men seemed pleased, too.

"Have you found a buyer yet?" Romilly asked his foreman.

"I think it will be Monsieur Chabrol again, like last year. He's a man you can deal with and not worry. He's not one of those cut-throats who say: 'Give me a good weight and I'll make it worth your while.'"

Gaston asked about the Puyeff grain and noted that Roubinet had carried out all his orders. He stayed for a little while longer, watching the flow of the rich fountain of golden grain. He loved this domain, as formerly he had loved the factory, and the thought came to him once again that here among these men who were doing real work, his happiness was as complete as was his misery at the teas at la Guichardie.

Upon his return to Preyssac he found Valentine and Colette just getting out of the car.

"Oh look, Dad's up," said Colette. "That's grand."

"You're being very foolish," Valentine said to her husband; she seemed annoyed. "Come to your room with me so I can give you your medicine."

"Why? I'm all right now."

"Never mind that, you'll be better off if you take it."

When they were alone Romilly noticed how upset his wife was.

"Never mind about the medicine. You don't need it, but I had to see you alone. You can't imagine what has happened to us."

He looked at her, surprised, frightened. She repeated

the conversation which she had had with Madame de La Guichardie.

"I can't tell you how insistent she was. She wanted me to give my consent on the spot. Thank goodness you weren't there. . . ."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Romilly. "The Saviniacs . . . the worst thing that could happen . . . a difficult family . . . proud . . . and perfect in itself. It's a shame! Colette could have been very happy."

"You haven't heard the worst yet," continued Valentine. "The boy loves Colette and she loves him."

"Has she said so?"

"No, in fact I doubt very much that they have broached the subject so formally. Oh, I only say that . . . I don't know, really. There is so little sentimentality between young people today. Certain phrases seem ridiculous to them. 'I love you,' for example. . . . But as Colette told me one day: 'If a fellow 'phones you every day, sends you postcards when he's away, teases you, criticizes your dresses, makes fun of what you say, you know very well that he loves you, even if he doesn't say so.' And it's true. . . . I'm positive that she loves André de Saviniac, even though she has never said a word about it to me."

For a long time the two of them sat silent. Leaning on the window-sill, Romilly gazed into the distance, but he hardly saw the towers of Chardeuil, separated one from the other by a strip of dark shadow, with a drift of white smoke overhanging the poplars.

"What are you thinking about?" she finally asked.

He hesitated. He seemed to be looking back on scenes from his childhood. The Eure Valley . . . A little path hidden amid the willows beside the water . . . The white, orange-tiled roofs and the reservoirs filled

with deep blue water. . . . He could hear the eternal hum of the looms. . . . He could smell the heavy odour of the wool. . . . After an instant he replied: "I don't know . . . Nothing."

7

AT THE BEGINNING of the century the Romillys held in Normandy a very special place among the industrialists whose business it is to spin and weave. They did not possess the gigantic factories of the Quesnays, the Pascal-Bouchets, or the Schmitts. At the most they had a hundred looms and hired three hundred workmen. But their prestige—both social and financial—was the equal of that of the most exalted families of the valley. Their factory was the oldest in the country, and their life was prudently simple. Even when Monsieur Achille Quesnay himself, by no means a vain man, had bought the Château de la Croix Saint-Martin, Déodat, the head of the Romilly family, still lived in the little house adjoining his factory—the same house in which his ancestors had lived. When he went to Paris, every week, and stayed with the Delandres, his best clients and his friends, he always wore an old suit, spotted and frayed. It helped him get the best of many a business deal.

"It's better to arouse pity than envy," he would say.

It is easy to imagine the astonishment of this powerful and rigid clan when one of Déodat's sons, Gaston Romilly, while still a very young man, showed a lively taste for romantic adventures. The worst of it was that he even went so far as to declare undying love for

women whom Pont-de-l'Eure could scarcely consider human beings. What caprice of heredity had brought this dreamy and tender boy into the life of these hard puritans? The Romillys were at a loss to understand it. But they felt themselves tragically humiliated when a circus set up its tents at Pont-de-l'Eure in 1903 and Gaston Romilly became the lover of one of the tight-rope walkers. He followed her from one fair to another, and spoke seriously of marrying her.

They had tried exile as a cure for him. Two years spent at Huddersfield, the Pont-de-l'Eure of Yorkshire, produced, as a little foresight would have warned, another affair which Gaston again threatened to conclude in marriage.

"Marriage!" cried Déodat Romilly. "Marriage! Great heavens! The boy is obsessed with the idea of getting married."

Warned by their friends the Stirlings, for whom Gaston was working, the Romillys called him home, cut off his allowance, and he seemed to settle down. He flatly refused, however, to be married off by his parents, although he was far from displeasing to the eyes of all the young heiresses of the valley. He was, after all, a handsome Norman with blue eyes and a blond Viking moustache; he was far more intelligent and sensitive than the majority of the boys of the region; and thanks to his escapades, was naturally endowed with a fatal prestige.

By 1907 Déodat Romilly was no longer strong enough to make the weekly trip to Paris. Gaston took his place—and very well, for he proved hard-working, methodical, and gifted with a sure taste in the choice of shades and designs.

As the family should have expected, these trips to Paris opened the way to new temptations. For two

years his mistress was an actress who played at the Mathurin Theatre, but she was too obvious a gold-digger to be very dangerous. One day in 1909 Gaston was in the Delandres' office, looking over the designs for the winter season. The Delandres were hesitating over a series which was very lovely, but which seemed a little too advanced in style. Finally Georges Delandres said to his father:

"We'll never make up our minds this way. . . . I've an idea . . . Suppose Romilly and I drop in on Valentine. . . . She always knows what's right."

At that time Valentine Gontran was a young woman of twenty-four who had a tiny dress-making establishment on the Rue Godot-de-Mauroy which was just beginning to be known. Nothing is more curious than to watch the evolution of these Parisian fashion centres—an evolution as regular as that of the animal species. Heavy financial backing can no more conjure them into existence in a few days than a living organism can be formed without starting from the original cell. But the reputation for excellent models, perfect cut, spreads like wild-fire. Suddenly all the women of Paris flock to its salons, which overnight have become too small. Hélène de Thianges is reassured because she finds Denise Holmann there, and Denise Holmann because she sees Isabelle Schmitt. The workrooms, piled high with orders, soon overflow the entire house. Soon it is necessary to move to larger and more elegant quarters. Banks offer credit. The business, whose original capital was nothing but the subtle taste of one woman, becomes an industrial enterprise. A company is launched and the founder suddenly discovers that she is rich. She travels and neglects this business which is no longer entirely her own. That is the first slip backwards;

then, without warning—bankruptcy. However, in some narrow street, in some badly lit room, a new power is gaining strength. Such, in 1909, was Valentine (for only her first name appeared on the sign outside her shop).

Valentine had come to Paris from Sarlat (in Périgord) when she was fourteen. She belonged to one of those half-peasant, half-bourgeois families whose multiple branches cover Périgord, Limousine, and Gascony. Her mother, the widow of a college professor, had brought her up and educated her as best she could, but died without leaving a penny. One of the numberless Gontrons, a director of a dress shop in Paris, had been approached by one of the many aunts and found Valentine a job. She immediately proved herself an excellent designer. The same thing holds true with this art as with any other: genius consists of equal parts of natural aptitude and hard work. Valentine explored the museums and libraries, she took courses in designing. At twenty-one she was a charming girl, with much natural dignity, and admirably gifted to command and to organize. Ill-treated by her uncle, who had launched her and then grown jealous of her success, she had found a little money and opened her own business. In three years she was a success. She had started with one workroom in 1906. By 1909 she occupied six, with thirty-five girls in each, and she wisely refused orders rather than move to larger and more expensive quarters.

"You're going to see an extraordinary person," Georges Delandre said to Romilly during the short walk from the Rue Vivienne to the Rue Godot-de-Mauroy. "Valentine is to the fashion world today what Rosie and Callot were in 1890 and 1900. . .

She's a respectable girl. . . . I ought to know, I've tried . . . it's no go. . . . And she has amazingly sure taste. . . . Well, you'll see for yourself."

From this first visit Gaston Romilly fell madly in love with Valentine in his own way, that is to say, silently. She was certainly everything that Georges Delandre had described. Her beauty was not striking, but rather peaceful, reassuring. Her features were remarkable for their air of calm and gentle strength. Romilly was accustomed to directing men, and he knew how difficult it was to have orders obeyed. He admired the ability of such a young girl to command an army of workers without a single tantrum or angry word. Her power lay in her clear mind, her firm will, and her ~~practical~~ knowledge of her business. He asked if he might come again for advice. She smiled (the same smile which she now gave him when he thought he was ill) with understanding and indulgence, for she immediately trusted this good giant.

Every week she saw him in the Rue Godot-le-Mauroy. He would arrive with his samples and his designs. She would examine them, compare, and eliminate. She would show him English materials which she considered finer and more modern than those made at Pont-de-l'Eure. He would shut his eyes and feel them.

"Frankly, I don't see the slightest difference."

She would laugh and accuse him of professional vanity, although actually she thought him modest, agreeable, and above all, so "steady." Partly to thank her, but mostly because he liked to be with her, he asked her out. He usually spent several days at a time in Paris and was always free in the evenings. She seemed to have very few friends. Their pleasure in these meetings had become more and more real.

In the summer of 1909 they took a trip to Venice together.

In 1910 she bore him a daughter.

8

NEWS TRAVELS FAST. Colette was still just a little monster, all red and wrinkled, whimpering in her young mother's arms, when Déodat Romilly was informed of her existence. It was the elder Delandre who had dropped a hint of the affair to Antoine Quesnay, another industrialist of Pont-de-l'Eure. He repeated it to his grandfather Monsieur Achille, who wasted no more love on the Romillys than he did on his other rivals. He brought the titbit to the Cercle des Commerçants.

"It seems that Gaston Romilly has a daughter in Paris. . . . Déodat is a grandfather in the dressmaking business. . . . Really, it's too good."

For a whole month Pont-de-l'Eure hummed with talk of this indiscretion.

In some people the social instincts are stronger than the natural instincts. Madame Romilly, an excellent grandmother to her legitimate grandchildren, had not the slightest desire to know the illegitimate daughter of her eldest son, nor the woman whom everyone described with the highest praise. For four years Gaston Romilly dared not say anything to his parents about his household in Paris, even though he knew perfectly well that they were aware of its existence. He saw Valentine three days a week; he adored his daughter; but he knew Pont-de-l'Eure too well to con-

sider the idea of uniting the two halves of his life.

Only an upheaval as violent as the declaration of war finally made it seem possible for him to speak. A lieutenant in the infantry, he had to leave for the front immediately after he was called to duty. Hoping to win his mother through the emotion of his departure, he tried to entrust her with his child and the woman whom he looked upon as his wife. The harshness of her reply, at such a time, amazed him.

"You can rest assured," Madame Romilly had said, "I'll never let them starve, but I will *not* see them. To have them here is out of the question."

Gaston Romilly's regiment was mobilized at Rouen, so that he had to go straight there from Pont-de-l'Eure and could not return to Paris. But in 1915 he spent his first furlough with Valentine instead of his family. It took only a few more months for this new war life to break completely the bonds that had chained him to the fear of Pont-de-l'Eure and its judgments. He married Valentine in both a civil and religious ceremony, and legitimized his daughter.

At the time of their marriage he asked Valentine to give up her work. He still had hopes of returning to Normandy. He thought that his wife would have a better chance of being accepted by the matrons of Pont-de-l'Eure if, like them, she were a lady of leisure. Valentine did as he asked, although not without many regrets, for she had grown to love the business which she now was forced to sell. She spent the last years of the war in Paris, seeing hardly anyone, bringing up her daughter with great care and devoting several hours a day to work for the Belgian refugees, a work in which her firm and methodical mind was of incalculable value.

By 1918, after the Armistice, Gaston was convinced

that he would have no difficulty in introducing his wife into his family. Daring optimism! During his absence he had forgotten his parents' "ideas." Many of their principles had lost all meaning for him, and had been completely effaced not only by action and danger, but particularly by the attitude of his comrades, whose backgrounds were different from his own. In the little town of Pont-de-l'Eure, on the other hand, these "ideas" had assumed an even greater importance under the restricted conditions of wartime. Déodat Romilly's moral authority had increased during the four years: he clung passionately to his local prestige, and was perfectly capable of sacrificing one of his children to it. Madame Romilly herself was inflexible.

"I don't understand you," she said to her son. "What do you want? Even admitting that, in spite of my repugnance, I would receive this woman in my home, you know very well that I could never get Pont-de-l'Eure to accept her. For her sake, you would be foolish to try it. . . . As for the child, legitimized or not, she'll still be born out of wedlock in everyone's eyes. . . . And what of our position if you brought her up here. . . . Could she go to the Convent of Saint Jean with my other granddaughters? Really, now! You can see perfectly well that the whole thing is inconceivable."

She was all the firmer because one of her daughters-in-law, stifled by the Pont-de-l'Eure brand of discipline, had recently asked for a divorce. There was, already, too much scandal in the family.

After several weeks of painful discussions, Gaston reluctantly realized that he would never convince these stubborn people. His father wanted him to stay in the business on the same basis as before the war. He would

take over the sales management, living in Paris and coming to Pont-de-l'Eure every week—alone. But Gaston had had a taste of independence, and would not place himself in such a humiliating situation. He would be in continual contact with his family and yet they refused even to meet the woman whom he loved with all his heart. Valentine, who came of sturdy peasant stock, was not afraid to live in the country as she had done in her girlhood. It was she who finally suggested buying an estate in Périgord or Gascony.

Gaston asked for a cash settlement on his share of the company of Déodat Romilly and Sons. With a part of this sum he bought the Preyssac estate, at the suggestion of Madame de La Guichardie, to whom he had been recommended by one of his war friends. As it so happened, it was a fortunate deal, because he bought this beautiful land before the franc dropped below par, paying little more for it than he would have paid before the war; ten years later it was worth four times as much, and Gaston had increased its value even more by working Preyssac according to methods which were new in the region. He had soon realized that there was no stable and well-oriented breed of milch cow in the country. He sent to Holland for several head of the best stock. In ten years his cattle had acquired such a reputation that they sold for three and four times the usual price. Valentine had taken charge of the dairy at Preyssac and under her supervision it soon became a model for the whole countryside. Only the enormous co-operative dairies of the Charentes could equal it.

In 1924 Déodat Romilly died without having been reconciled to his son. Although he had favoured the younger sons in his will, he could not deprive Gaston of his legal share. This made the young Romillys very

comfortable, but they still lived simply, going to Paris only for brief stays and never taking long trips. Deeply hurt by the hostility of the Romillys of Pont-de-l'Eure, they had been very cautious in Périgord, and had taken care to guard themselves against any possible reproach. But the patronage of Madame de La Guichardie, who had not been long in recognizing Valentine's fine qualities, had smoothed the way to their immediate social position. There are almost no relations between industrial Normandy and agricultural Périgord. Valentine's family was of good report, not exactly in the vicinity where the Romillys now lived, but on the outskirts of the province. In Périgueux there was a surgeon by the name of Gontran who had an excellent reputation. A great-uncle, Adolphe Gontran, had lived near Brantôme for a long time. As for Valentine's brief career in the business world, Madame de La Guichardie had set the tone, and had recounted marvels which only served to confirm the good opinion she had already established. It might be added that country life does not give people much chance to be asked to dinners and parties, particularly in winter. That is why, except for a few cases where honour is at stake, they will seldom refuse to go to a rich and gracious home.

There was only one point on which Valentine and her husband had not been completely truthful with their neighbours. They had said they were married in 1909, after they had first met. In this way, no one in Périgord even suspected the illegitimate birth of Colette. More than from her neighbours, Valentine wanted to keep this hidden from Colette herself. Although she insisted to her husband that her conscience did not trouble her in the least, and that she would do the same thing if she

were to start all over again, she was anxious and even ashamed at the thought that her daughter might judge her severely.

That was why she had brought her up at home, for her birth certificate, which any private school would have demanded, bore the notation: "Child of Gaston Romilly and Valentine Gontran, born out of wedlock," and in the margin, "Legitimized by subsequent marriage." Suddenly a possible engagement threatened to open the wound. The birth certificate would have to be produced before they could have a civil marriage ceremony. The Saviniacs would find out about it, so would Colette. It would be read aloud before the witnesses. Perhaps the Saviniacs, high principled as they were, would refuse a marriage which was tinged with illegitimacy? Colette would blame her parents for her disappointment. All Périgord would know the shameful reason for the break. Certainly Valentine had always known that some day Colette would have to know the circumstances surrounding her birth, but she had hoped that Colette would marry a young man who was a stranger to the country, whose family would be more discreet and less exacting. She had believed herself safe for a long time yet, and suddenly she was face to face with disaster. This woman who had always been so strong had been disarmed by happiness and was infinitely vulnerable in an already tender spot. She found that she had no courage to struggle, for she was only too well acquainted with the tenacious prejudices of this class.

THEY WERE BOTH so overcome by painful meditations that they sat motionless for a long time without realizing how late it was. They were torn from their silence only when they heard Colette's voice calling gaily:

"Well, what about dinner, Mother? Did the tea at la Guichardie spoil your appetite? Not mine . . . I'm *famished*."

Her parents tried desperately to act naturally, with the result that she immediately knew that something was wrong. From the tennis court she had watched the long conversation between Madame de La Guichardie and Madame de Saviniac, and an infallible instinct had told her that all this talk concerned André and herself. After dinner, instead of staying on the terrace with her mother and father as usual, she said:

"I have a book I want to finish . . . I'll be back in a little while."

On summer evenings, when the weather was nice, the Romillys always sat side by side on a garden bench in the centre of the Preyssac terrace. With an ever-renewed pleasure they would look out over the vast circle of hills, forests, and meadows, while night slowly enveloped them. Valentine feared this hour and loved it. Leaning against her husband, she felt herself supported and reassured by the warmth of another body, and with a feeling of deep contentment she enjoyed the daily miracle. The shadows conquered light so gradually, in such easy steps, that Valentine waited night after night to see darkness really fall. The blue sky turned to ash grey. The outlines of the hills blended together. Suddenly Valentine discovered the first star, a brilliant pin-

prick in the sombre vault spread out above the cedars; she raised her head; and already, without her quite knowing how, the Milky Way had unfurled its silver banner of foam among the stars.

Gaston, who shared his wife's pleasure in the spectacle, usually watched it in silence. This evening, however, he took Valentine's arm as soon as he was certain that Colette had left, and looking around him to be sure that no one could hear, said:

"All during dinner I was thinking about what you told me. . . . We can't wait because we would suddenly find ourselves floundering in a morass of difficulties and lies, and it would look as though we had been cowardly."

"That's what I think, too," she said, "but what can we do? "

"I can only see two possible solutions. . . . Either we can give the Saviniacs to understand that the plan doesn't seem quite desirable to us. We can find some pretext; Colette is too young, she prefers to live in Paris, oh, almost anything . . ."

Valentine interrupted him:

"No, we can't, because of Colette. We might have been able to do that, at the risk of making enemies out of the Saviniacs, if Colette didn't love André, but she does love him. . . . During dinner I could see her trying not to talk about him. . . . But in spite of herself, his name popped up in every sentence, and every time she said it, she seemed to be in another world. Colette knows only too well what she wants. If we invent imaginary obstacles, she'll find a way to get over them. The only thing that would stop her would be the truth and I'm not too sure that would do it. She has an iron will, which you have only

made stronger by giving her such a free rein. I always told you it wasn't wise."

"Well, in that case," he said quickly, "I can see only one other solution. We must tell Madame de La Guichardie about everything. I think she likes us. Knowing her as well as we do, I don't think our news will shock her very much. Who knows? Perhaps she will have enough authority to win the Saviniacs and make them see that this old story is not very important. At any rate, she is the one person in the world who might have a chance of doing it."

Valentine thought this over for a moment, and then gave her consent with that discouraged lassitude that seemed to have taken such a surprising hold of her in the last few hours.

"It's a serious thing. Like you, I am sure that Madame de La Guichardie will not be very shocked, either as a woman or as a friend. But she lives for her prestige in this region; she abhors failures; it would be very easy for her to take the simplest way out and turn against us. . . . And besides—although she probably wouldn't mind so much our being lovers before our marriage (in fact, I'm quite sure that it wouldn't make the slightest difference to her), she might be hurt to think that we hid it from her, that we didn't take her into our confidence. She can withdraw her friendship. Then, too, she can ruin all Colette's hopes. . . . But I can't see any other way out. . . . You are right; we've got to tell Madame de La Guichardie about the whole thing."

She thought for a moment.

"And Colette . . . she has got to know everything, too. She'll have to know eventually, even if it's only through André. Will you talk with Colette and tell

her our story? I simply couldn't do it. I may be a coward, but I just don't have the physical strength for it."

"But why?" he asked. "You yourself have said that there is nothing shameful in our story. . . . Perhaps in the eyes of the world we were guilty, but were we guilty in our own eyes? As far as I am concerned, during that whole period, and particularly after Colette's birth, I felt myself as close to you as though we had been married."

"Oh, and so did I," she assured him. "But . . ."

She had a vision of the little apartment where she lived at that time, of Colette's crib standing near her bed, of the cook and her questions: "But is Monsieur's name really Gontran?"; of Gaston's mother, Madame Déodat Romilly, who had continually refused to recognize her existence, or even to meet Colette.

"Don't misunderstand me," she said. . . . "I don't feel that we did anything wrong. . . . We did the best we could under very difficult conditions. . . . But we did live on the outer rim of society. . . . Your family refused to know me. . . . Right or wrong, that was hard for me and still leaves an unpleasant memory. . . . And then, to explain the whole thing to Colette, we would first have to give her a picture of the world in which I lived, and your parents. . . . Her first reaction would be to judge our acts by the lives of people *she* knows. . . . When Thérèse, the daughter up at the Vauzelles' farm, had her baby, we sent her away from Colette, who had been her best friend until then. . . . We paid her to go to Périgueux and to have her baby secretly. . . . Considering our own past, that wasn't a very broad-minded thing to do. . . . We're paying for it now. How could we convince Colette that

our case was any different from Thérèse's? And, as a matter of fact, was it very different? I was lucky; you turned out to be a decent person, but you could just as easily have deserted me. . . . And then what would I have done? No, I really can't face the idea of talking to Colette. . . . If you think you can . . ."

"I think I could if it was absolutely necessary, but it would be extremely hard. And I don't think it's essential. . . . Why don't we ask Madame de La Guichardie to speak to Colette as well as to the Saviniacs? She loves Colette; she is a clever woman. . . . She would be touched to think we asked her, and because she is an outsider, she could tell our story with more detachment."

They heard Colette coming across the gravel path—as a matter of fact, she had intentionally made a good deal of noise to announce her presence. She sat with them for a few minutes and then went in to bed. They were not long in following her, but continued their discussion long after they reached their room. At last, about two o'clock in the morning, they fell asleep after they had repeated the same things a hundred times over.

10

MADAME DE LA GUICHARDIE'S reaction was none of those that the Romillys had expected. They had feared anger, reproach; they found, on the contrary, sympathy and an eagerness to help. To tell the truth, if they had known their old friend better, they would not have had a hard time guessing these results.

Madame de La Guichardie had several faults, of which pride was the first. She loved to dominate and could be pitiless in revenge or hate; but at the same time she was utterly without hypocrisy, and she was incapable of pretending moral indignation when she felt no such thing. She had had many lovers, among them several great cynics. She was armed with a fine indulgence for anything concerning human passions. In addition, for ten years she had watched this woman who had so obviously vowed her life to her husband and child, and had seen her live nearby, conforming to the rigid conventions of provincial society. In Madame de La Guichardie's opinion, Valentine was infinitely purer than she was herself, and Gaston's confession did not change this opinion in the least.

However, she had had too much experience not to know that society judges men not by their acts or their intentions, but by appearances; or, to be more exact, on those appearances which are socially "correct." As a girl, and even as an older woman, she had deceived Monsieur de La Guichardie in the most continuous and brilliant manner, but there remained not a trace of any of her flights of fancy. As the respected wife of this honourable gentleman she had made a triumphal entrance, banners flying and sails unfurled, into the calm port of old age. In the case of the Romillys, the only thing that shocked her was not the "sin," for which she felt not the slightest disapproval, but the fact that it was recorded in the official files.

"That is most annoying!" she murmured, suddenly very serious.

She was seated facing Gaston in the vast salon at Preyssac. It had originally been the guard room, which Valentine had transformed by hanging its walls with

tapestry. Tossing her head in annoyance, the old lady could not help noticing that a border had been added to the largest of these hangings, thereby greatly decreasing its value. "But what's the difference, tapestry doesn't bring you in a penny piece any more . . . Another exchange value that's slipping. Well, come! come! that's not the question on hand." She looked at Gaston Romilly's frank face. He looked so good, this nice giant. Twenty, thirty years before he was the type of man that she would have loved. She would have to do something to get them out of the mess, him and his pretty daughter. And anyway, her personal honour was at stake. She had been only too outspoken the previous evening, when she had indicated to all Périgord that she was interested in this marriage. She could not face failure. But how to manoeuvre out of it? She could see that Romilly was ready to say something more.

"Be quiet," she said. "Let me talk. It's not going to be easy. Just how will this story affect the Saviniacs? Xavier won't give a fig for the affair itself, but he'll be very sensitive to any shadow of gossip. Anne? I don't really know, but I think she'll be just the opposite. With her, morality is conventional, but the heart is all-important. Yes, I think I can handle Anne. I'll play on her emotions. Xavier? That's a little more difficult. . . . He's not so easily swayed. Of course, if he could be shown that no one would know . . ."

"But that's not impossible," began Gaston Romilly. "Why——"

"Be still!" said Madame de La Guichardie. "Now, let's see. Who needs to know the truth? The witnesses? Since the new law, you only need one on each side. I'll be yours, and on their side, old Uncle Pierre

de Saviniac, who is as deaf as a post. Then . . . why, of course. The marriage can be performed at Chardeuil. And it will be my old friend, Ménétrier, who will read the act. What an idiot I am to worry! It's as simple as that. If anyone understands a single word that he reads, Ménétrier will have to answer to me! So, it's all arranged," she concluded. "Believe me, Romilly, you don't deserve it, you and Valentine. Not telling me the whole story in the very beginning! Indeed! But I think I'll be able to get you out of it. If only Xavier doesn't decide to be stubborn about it. He's quite capable of it. Well, that's all right, we have a couple of aces up our sleeve, too."

By now she was in her glory. She adored action. In the good old days in Paris, under the nominal authority of the gentle La Guichardie, she had formed ministries, elected high functionaries, overthrown administrative councils. Périgord was a rather limited field for such brilliant strategy, but still, trouble was in the offing. She made as careful preparation for this as for an international intrigue.

"And now, send Valentine to me so I can tell her all the mean things I am thinking about her."

Romilly rose, and seemed embarrassed. He turned toward the door and then came back.

"Yes," he said, "I'll send Valentine in to you, but first I wish you would consent to see Colette. Naturally, she knows nothing about all this. We should have told her ourselves; we simply didn't have the courage to do it. And anyway we would not have done a very good job of it. We were so afraid of losing her love, and that would have made us very awkward. You seem to be very fond of her; she admires you; if this revelation, which must certainly upset her, comes from you, and

if she understands from the outset that you do not consider her birth monstrous or shameful, I am sure that everything will come out all right. . . . I know that we are taking advantage of your friendship, but you have always been so kind to us, and you are so respected here in Périgord, that when anyone is in trouble he is naturally tempted to lean on you. . . . At any rate, Valentine and I agree that you are the only person to speak to Colette."

Madame de La Guichardie shrugged her shoulders; it was a gesture which she hoped was resigned, and which succeeded only in being triumphant.

"Oh, do be still," she scolded. "You overwhelm me with compliments just so that you can turn around and push the dirty work off on me . . . I've more than enough of my own . . . I will not speak to Colette. . . . Most certainly not. . . . Well, what are you waiting for? Go find her and send her in here. . . . Well, hurry up. . . . Good heavens, man, you're slow! "

11

IN THE COURSE of her long and active life, Madame de La Guichardie had learned that the best way to carry off a difficult conversation is to make no preparations for it. Therefore the few minutes that she was alone waiting for Colette she spent in making a rapid inventory of the room in which she was sitting. She knew how hard it was to furnish those enormous stone halls. Anything but Gothic coffered and enormous tables seems ridiculous. But Valentine had adroitly combined the

mellow old woods with bright hangings. Valentine had remarkably good taste, thought Madame de La Guichardie. Perhaps she didn't deserve so much credit; after all, that was her business. But still, she had a quality rare to the women of her generation: respect.

Colette came in. She was wearing a shantung dress with a leather belt and a blue kerchief knotted around her neck.

"She is a pretty girl," thought Madame de La Guichardie, watching with pleasure the tranquil expression in the girl's rather long face.

Colette came up to the old lady and kissed her.

"Thanks again for yesterday," she said. "I don't know when I've had such a good time."

"Sit down, Colette, I have some serious things to say to you. Let's see . . . first of all, tell me . . . have you ever thought of André de Saviniac as your husband?"

"André? Of course I have, Madame, often."

"And what about him? Do you know what he thinks about it?"

"Well, naturally, Madame. We've often spoken of it. It's all settled."

Madame de La Guichardie rapped her cane on the flag-stone floor.

"Bravo! Colette. How I love you youngsters. 'We've often spoken of it. It's all settled!' You're really marvellous. . . . Yes, indeed. The trouble is, my child, there are a few things which you do not know and which could (I don't say *will*, because I am sure that everything will come out all right), but which *could* interfere with your marriage to André."

Colette, her elbow on her knee, and her pointed chin leaning on her hand, looked up in surprise, and replied in a rather brusque voice:

"Really, Madame, I can't think of anything that could stop André and me from getting married. We've thought it all over; our minds are made up. . . . We've known each other for ten years. . . . This isn't all on the spur of the moment."

"You are delightful!" said Madame de La Guichardie. "*Your* minds are made up. . . . *You* have thought it all over! There are still your parents, and his. You'll need their consent. And no matter how much confidence you have in yourselves, you will need their help."

"Of course, Madame, we know that. But why should our parents refuse their consent, or their help?"

"I don't say that they will refuse it. . . . However, you will have to know that there is something in your parents' past, in your own past—a little thing to which I myself attach not the slightest importance (heavens, no!), but which might make such strait-laced people as the Saviniacs hesitate. You are very young, Colette, my child, and you have known too happy a life to understand the difficulties that beset your parents before your birth. Your grandparents on the Romilly side, whom I have not had the honour to meet, but whom many people have described to me, were very strict; of course you know that you have never seen them. Haven't you ever wondered why? That's what I am going to tell you. Your father adored your mother, just as you love André, perhaps even more. . . . Oh, yes, it's possible. . . . But his parents refused to let him marry her. Well, he had to have their help to make a living for you. . . . Do you see? . . . Well, anyway, when you were born, in 1910, your parents were not married. . . ."

Anxiously she watched Colette's face for the effect

that this revelation would have. The young girl, her head still leaning on her hand, seemed to be waiting.

"Then what?" she asked.

"What do you mean: 'Then what?' That's all, child. . . . Naturally they were married later on—in 1915—and since then their life has been all that you know: affection, faithfulness . . ."

"Yes, I know," said the young girl, "but where's the objection to our marriage?"

"My dear child, are you making fun of me? Or is it simply that you do not understand what I have just finished telling you. At least you know what an illegitimate child is, don't you?"

"Naturally," said Colette. "It seems that I was an illegitimate child until my parents married. . . . Of course I know. . . . I've always known."

"You have always known!" cried Madame de La Guichardie, completely disconcerted by the girl's calm acceptance. "Who told you?"

"Several people. . . . It seems that my old nurse, the one they called la Guettou, talked about it at times. . . . She was gone by the time I was four and I scarcely remember her . . . but she had told the story to Mélanie, that pretty black-haired little chambermaid, who has often explained it to me. . . . Then later, Thérèse . . . and others. . . ."

Madame de La Guichardie threw up her hands in despair.

"To think that those two unhappy people have suffered tortures for eighteen years, have worried and fretted, wondering if you would ever forgive them for something which you have known since you were crawling on all fours. Really, life is funny. . . . The only thing I can't understand is that you have never said or

done anything. . . . Understand, I think you were perfectly right, but I am surprised that even as such a little tot you had the good sense to see that at the bottom there was nothing very grave in it."

"Oh, I think it bothered me in the beginning, but I really can't remember. . . . I do know that one day I was terribly unhappy when I heard la Guettou say to another nurse in front of me: 'Poor little thing, she's almost like an orphan. . . . She has no family.' That made such an impression on me that it is one of my earliest memories. For a long time I indulged in much self-pity. That was ridiculous. But I imagined such ghastly things that I was extremely relieved when Mélanie told me what had really happened. 'What, is that all?' I thought. Then gradually I forgot all about it. What do you expect, Madame? That was all done and over with. . . . My parents never mentioned it. . . . I should never have dared to broach the subject first. . . . And I admired them a great deal, particularly my father. . . . I admit, I did think that they would have managed things better if they had got married immediately, but I decided that something very important had probably kept them from doing so. . . . And anyway, I thought my mother had been much more honourable in loving my father before she married him than if she had loved many men after she married him."

"My dear child, hush," exclaimed Madame de La Guichardie. "You don't know what you're talking about. That's all very pretty, Colette: and as far as I'm concerned, I quite approve; but I don't think it will be as easy to convince the Saviniacs. . . . I don't want to alarm you, because I'm sure it can be done, but I suggest that you let me take care of it, and above

all, I don't think you should tell André about it yourself. . . ."

"But André knows, Madame."

"André knows? Who told him?"

"I did, Madame. . . . Surely you realize that I have told him everything I know about my childhood. . . ."

"You are an extraordinary child," said Madame de La Guichardie. "And what did young André have to say to that?"

"André? . . . Nothing. . . . Oh, yes. I think he said: 'How romantic.'"

Madame de La Guichardie stood up with an air of comic despair.

"Go away. . . . And send your parents in to me . . . both of them. . . . I want them immediately."

Two minutes later Valentine and her husband came in without their daughter. Madame de La Guichardie reassured them and repeated her conversation with Colette.

"And now my job is over. Go and kiss your daughter."

But Valentine sat down again.

"No," she said. "Please, I don't want any scene. . . . I never want to talk about it with Colette. . . . I hope, rather, that you will ask her never to say anything to her father or to me, about the conversation which she has just had with you. You find that surprising? Why? . . . Now we know that she has always been aware of her history, and that she thinks no less of us. That's wonderful, but it would be very painful for me to talk about it. . . . If what you say is true, she doesn't seem to consider it important. . . . That is possible. . . . But I am still sensitive. . . . Why open up old wounds? It's always a dangerous

thing to do. . . . When Gaston cleaned out that swamp near the Justin creek, the whole family came down with a fever. It's better to let sleeping dogs lie."

"That's not very brave," said Gaston Romilly, putting his hand on Valentine's shoulder.

"Perhaps not, my dear. . . . But what good would that kind of courage do? "

"None, of course, except for us. . . . It would be more sincere, more frank."

"I don't want to," said Valentine with a determination that astonished the other two. "Besides, what change is there today? Madame de La Guichardie tells us that Colette has known the story for ten years. . . . She has never mentioned it. . . . We have been very happy and so has she. Why create an atmosphere of drama when nothing has happened? No, Gaston, I don't hold with that kind of sincerity. There are wounds which should be healed by rest. . . . At least, that's my idea, even if I am wrong."

The long discussion which followed found her firm in her refusal, and Madame de La Guichardie, who had already undertaken to win over the Saviniacs, had to ask Colette to remain silent about the whole situation the next time she saw her parents.

12

MADAME DE LA GUICHARDIE'S campaign against the Saviniacs was planned according to the classic principles of the Napoleonic Wars: surprise the enemy, destroy him in small units, and be the strongest at a predeter-

mined point. She knew perfectly well that it would have been dangerous to approach the two of them together; their double resistance would have been too strong. Therefore she had asked her old friend and neighbour, Pierre Marcenat, to invite Xavier de Saviniac to go hunting on Tuesday, the day she had picked for her offensive. She knew, as did all Périgord, that Marcenat had several coveys of quail that year at Chardeuil. This was unexpected luck in a country that had almost no game. And she knew that Xavier, who was a very keen sportsman, would be sure to accept so generous an invitation. Pierre Marcenat had received precise instructions: he was to keep Saviniac until five, and then make sure that he called in at la Guichardie on his return. These orders were executed with care by the old gentleman who had once greatly admired Madame de La Guichardie, an admiration which she had guessed and which she had been careful to keep alive.

She arrived at Breuilh about three, sure of finding Anne de Saviniac, since she had telephoned that she was coming, and equally sure to find her alone, since she had arranged her husband's afternoon elsewhere. She had not been in the house for quite some time. She glanced at the park with the air of a visiting sovereign on a tour of inspection. Nothing had changed. Xavier de Saviniac, who loathed needless expense, considered it foolish to plant flowers on an estate that he visited for only two months a year. The drives were not weeded, the grass had invaded the groves of trees, and the paths had disappeared, submerged by the undergrowth. In the château, the guest saw even more definite evidence of this disdain for appearances which had helped to augment the fortune of the Saviniacs

through many generations. The flag-stones were bare except in front of the chairs, where little rugs had been strewn. These rugs were of extraordinary shapes, and—unbelievable but true—they had been made by Xavier's mother, who had pieced them from her husband's worn suits. Twenty years earlier, this woman, Laure de Saviniac, had been famous throughout all Périgord for her miserliness. On her summer hats she wore ribbons which bore the oft-repeated name of a Périgueux candy-maker; another story has it that during the last war she forced her husband to go to bed with the sun to save candles.

"And what did you do in bed?" someone had boldly asked her. "Surely you can't go to sleep so early."

"Oh, we said our Rosary," she had replied.

The countryside had been amazed to see this well-born woman sell her strawberries by the cup, and rent her plots of vegetable greens to the butcher and baker. But their astonishment changed to admiration after her stoic death, when they heard about her enormous fortune.

"She had good blood in her, old Laure de Saviniac," Périgord said. "Do you remember the Montal marriage, when she came wearing two different shoes and yet looked like a queen? And the way she answered one daring fool who asked what she had given for a wedding present? '*We* never give a wedding present; that is contradictory to the traditions of our two families.'"

Madame de La Guichardie thought about these stories while a little servant, who couldn't have been more than thirteen, took her into Anne de Saviniac's boudoir. This small room, with its stone walls, had formerly been the oratory of the lords of Breuilh. In

the middle stood a table covered by an old and torn green cloth. It held two books which the methodical old lady picked up whenever she was alone—to look at the titles. They were the poems of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and a tiny mass book, filled with pious pictures and closed by a little black elastic with a medal on the end of it. In a corner, above a little altar, hung a tiny crucifix, a font of holy water, and a spray of green leaves. A little higher she had a coloured engraving of the Virgin done in the Byzantine style: Our Lady of Eternal Grace. To the right of the altar stood a candle which Anne de Saviniac lighted during storms. On the mantel were innumerable photographs surrounding another plaster Virgin: Our Lady of Lourdes this time. The picture frames, covered with blessed box, contained portraits of ladies, priests, and babies. The largest frame was decorated with a royal crown and the picture bore a well-known signature, in letters almost half an inch high. Madame de La Guichardie had finished her inventory when the door opened. Anne de Saviniac, whom the little servant had found in the garden, came in all out of breath, flustered and blushing.

“I’m so sorry you had to wait,” she said, “and particularly in here. . . . After you ’phoned I thought that I should have suggested going to see you with Xavier, since you wanted to speak with us. . . .”

“Not at all,” said Madame de La Guichardie. “That would have upset all my plans. As a matter of fact, I preferred to come myself, and I am delighted to find you alone. . . . I have some important things to discuss with you. In this case, your advice will be much more valuable than Xavier’s in spite of the great respect which I hold for your husband’s judgments. . . . I would consult Xavier on questions of business, but with

you I want to talk about things of the heart, and in such matters you are by far the more competent of the two. . . . You needn't deny it. . . . You know it perfectly well."

Anne de Saviniac blushed still more, and protested feebly.

"I have always maintained," continued Madame de La Guichardie, opening her fan, "that no one judges the mistakes of love—so long as they are accompanied by sincere repentance—that no one judges them with more understanding than a woman at once irreproachable and sensitive."

Madame de Saviniac assumed an attitude of modesty which became her admirably well. Madame de La Guichardie thought to herself that she was still pretty, indeed, much too pretty for that brute of a Xavier; then she abandoned generalities to recount Valentine Romilly's story with much emotion. Anne de Saviniac listened without interruption, but with increasing surprise, and when her guest had finished:

"What a story!" she said. "Whoever would have thought that Madame Romilly, with her very proper air, had once been a loose woman?"

Madame de La Guichardie snapped her fan shut in irritation.

"A loose woman!" she cried. "Anne, is this you speaking so cruelly? Really, now. I tell you the story of an unfortunate woman who had to force her way to happiness through difficulties which you or I have never dreamed of, who has remained faithful to a single love, who has paid for her mistake by an exemplary existence, and that is all you can say to me! Permit me to inform you, my dear Anne, that you are singularly lacking in Christian charity when you condemn those

creatures whom the Church herself pardoned when she married them. . . ."

"No doubt," murmured Madame de Saviniac, confused. "But the Church does not recommend illegitimate children. . . ."

"The Church, my dear, blames the sinner, but forgives the penitent, and above all, she does not *know* illegitimate children. . . . As far as the Church is concerned, she recognizes children who have been baptized and those who have not been baptized; those who have been, enter a pure life free of all stigma and it would be a sin to hold them responsible for the errors of their parents."

"Yes, of course," murmured Anne de Saviniac, embarrassed. "Surely . . . Oh, I am not the one to throw the first stone. . . . Who of us can claim he has never sinned, at least in thought?" she continued blushing. . . . "But I would not choose a family touched by scandal to join to mine, which I have tried to keep pure."

"Anne," said Madame de La Guichardie. "Anne! You astonish and annoy me! . . . I came to you sure of finding an ally and what do I find? A Pharisee. . . . What was that? A scandal? Will you kindly tell me what scandal has ever been caused by poor Valentine? Who in this country has led a more exemplary life than she? Indeed, your son, who is only twenty-two, has more sense than you. . . . Because he has known this story for a long time. . . . Colette told him all about it. And do you know what he said? He said, quite simply, 'How romantic!' And he is right, it is romantic. . . . I can feel that, old woman that I am, because I have lived, and I have loved. . . . But you, shut in your egotistic

little life, you don't even know what love is!"

"You're being unjust!" trembled Anne de Saviniac.
"I who have loved Xavier so dearly——"

Madame de La Guichardie remembered Xavier's marriage, wisely arranged by his mother, and the violent discussions which arose between the two families over the question of the dowry. That was another tradition of the Saviniacs: they never gave money to their children. She almost replied harshly, but she felt a great pity for this gentle and oppressed woman, whose vaporous imagination had transformed the bitterest bargain into a sentimental novel, or, as she called it, "a marriage made in heaven." For the sake of the cause which she was defending, she was content merely to take advantage of the emotion which she had just provoked. When she left half an hour later, she had Anne's consent, on condition that Xavier would give his, so that she would not have to enter into combat with her terrifying husband.

13

ALTHOUGH SHE HAD conquered, Madame de La Guichardie was not completely at ease as she looked forward to the second conversation she had arranged. Her campaign, it is true, was unfolding as she had hoped. She had revealed not only the Emperor's vigour of conception but also his thunderous rapidity of execution. Everyone thought her still in Italy and she was already on the banks of the Rhine. By four o'clock she had won her victory over the wife; at five she was to attack

the husband. But when she saw the towers of la Guichardie silhouetted against the horizon, she wondered what she would say to him. She was not without experience with the Saviniac family; she had been Laure's friend; she had watched Xavier grow up; they were a close family, and sharp, and there was almost grandeur in their sacrifices to the family tradition.

However, just a few days previous to this, chance (or, really, the extent and dependability of her sources of information) had brought to her knowledge a piece of news which, if mentioned at the right moment, might prove extremely valuable. During September Xavier de Saviniac was accustomed to leave the country for two or three days at a time to go, so he said, hunting in Sologne. Observers in Périgord, as acute as they were provincial, were prone to remark that Xavier's friends must own some very poor hunting grounds, for he rarely brought back much game. They also noticed that Saviniac, who was a vigorous man, always returned curiously tired from these expeditions. Observers in Paris had been heard to remark that these absences coincided in a curiously precise manner with those of Mademoiselle Marcelle, Saviniac's secretary, a stunning girl of twenty-five or thirty, who remained in Paris during vacations.

"Now there is something," thought Madame de La Guichardie, "which will keep friend Xavier from being too severe toward a faithful couple."

But when she saw him enter, thick-set, ruddy complexioned under his close-cut hair, and the habit of command graven in every feature, she reminded herself that he would be a "hard nut to crack." Saviniac was in a fine humour, for he had shot three partridge.

"Well," said Madame de La Guichardie, "it

looks as though Périgord is better than Sologne."

"For once," he said with a satisfied air. "Well, Anne will be delighted: that will take care of her lunch Thursday."

And having therewith indicated that he was in a hurry to get home with his day's catch, he glanced discreetly at his wrist-watch.

"Marcenat said you wanted to see me a few minutes."

For the second time within a few hours, she repeated the Romillys' story, fanning herself vigorously to hide her nervousness. This time she set a different tone to it, treating it in a business-like manner, man to man, as an incident of very little importance. As she talked, she watched her listener, and from his mutterings, from his ironic approval as he nodded his head, she knew that his reaction would be hostile and his resistance immediate.

"There, that's all that I wanted to say," she concluded. "You can see for yourself that it's not very important. . . . But I felt that you should know ahead of time."

"Oh, you're quite right." His voice jeered at her. "It's nothing at all. You are merely telling me that for ten years milord Romilly has deceived the honest families of Périgord, and that he is trying to marry off the daughter of his mistress to my son. Oh, no, it's nothing at all."

"What? His mistress's daughter?" cried Madame de La Guichardie in rising indignation.

"Madame," he said severely. "You were my mother's best friend. . . . You know the Saviniacs well. . . . You know they don't like to have the wool pulled over their eyes. . . . Romilly has tricked me. . . . He has fixed it so that our families received

a woman whom he had kept. . . . I don't know how you judge that; I must admit that I do not find it very honest; and I should like to hear no further mention of this gentleman nor of his daughter. . . . I shall make no scandal, I assure you, and out of deference to you, I will keep the story secret, but as far as an engagement between our families is concerned, it's out of the question! "

This brittle tone had the happy effect of sending Madame de La Guichardie into a towering rage. Furiously she struck her cane on the flagstones.

"I don't believe it!" she said. "And what about your son? And little Colette? Do you think for one instant that those two youngsters are going to kiss your hand and accept your decrees? I'd help them run away sooner than see that."

"Thank you," he replied. "That's what I call being a true friend. . . . But I might as well warn you now, if André does that I shall disinherit him."

This word, a little old-fashioned in a world of rapid changes and of shaky capitalism, nevertheless retains some force in those half-peasant families where, with the complicity of unscrupulous notaries, it is fairly easy to despoil one son to the advantage of the others. But by now Madame de La Guichardie was really furious. Across her knees, her fan, her cane, and her lorgnette were dancing a triangular ballet not unlike a set of juggling balls.

"Oh, is that so? You will disinherit him? Well, we'll see about that. . . . Really, are you going out of your mind? To hear you talk, you'd think our own families were immaculate. . . . Would you have refused Diane de Montal for your son? No, of course not. And yet, you know as well as I do why her sister

took the veil. . . . Yes? . . . Well, that was a bit more serious than the Romillys' affair, I should say. And suppose we talk about the Saviniac family for a little while. . . . Oh, yes! There is a family pure of any stain, isn't it, my fine Xavier? Of course, there is your brother Joseph who has lived in Tonkin for ten years with a native servant, and who has presented you with some charming little yellow nephews. Oh, I know that no one ever mentions them, but would you like to have me send for one of them. . . . Believe me, it would be a sensation at my teas. . . . And there is also our cousin Raymond de Saviniac, who directs a perfectly honourable establishment in Paris. . . . But he's another one that we never see. . . . And, oh yes, I almost forgot, there's a certain Xavier de Saviniac who has such innocent pastimes and who goes hunting in Sologne, for big, blonde quail, while his dear wife . . ."

Madame de La Guichardie was about to insinuate a few facts of which she was almost entirely ignorant, but at the prodigious change which she had produced in her guest's expression as soon as she started speaking of the Saviniacs, she saw that the battle was taking a favourable turn and she stopped. Beneath her anger she had herself under perfect control and she judged it impolitic to upset her adversary too roughly.

"Come now," said Xavier in a coaxing voice which he always assumed at his board meetings when he found the majority against him, "surely you're not going to quarrel with a man whom you have known since his birth."

"My dear Xavier, I have not forgotten that your mother was my best friend. I have not the faintest desire to quarrel with you. . . . But you really annoy

me with this talk of disinheriting your son merely because he loves a charming girl."

"You know very well that I was only joking. . . . As long as the affair stays with the two families, I'm not the man to cause his son any unhappiness. . . . The only thing . . ."

She knew him too well not to have foreseen that if he consented, he would demand a financial advantage in exchange for this concession. Indeed, she felt a certain intellectual satisfaction in perceiving her adversary withdraw to a second line for which she had already made preparations.

"The only thing is," he continued, "I feel that in these circumstances it would be Romilly's duty to increase his daughter's dowry of his own free will. . . . After all, what can you expect? A contract should represent equal advantages. If you take away something on one side, you have to find some way of re-establishing the balance. Since Romilly has already suggested giving his daughter Brouillac, why not give her both the land *and* a cash settlement?"

"What difference does that make to you?" asked Madame de La Guichardie. "Colette is an only child. Some day she will have all the land and the capital as well."

"Tut! Tut!" said Saviniac, who had regained all his confidence now that the conversation had veered away from the questionable virtues of his family. ". . . Will have . . . some day. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. . . . You never know what might happen. . . . Romilly might die; his wife might remarry. . . . Then too, if he gives them Brouillac, I might be able to keep Breuilh a little longer. You know that it is not the tradition of the Saviniacs to

give their children any land while the parents are living. We give them their name, and that is enough. . . . Look," he continued, "I'll let you handle these negotiations. . . . I can trust you. . . . You are very wise in such things."

Madame de La Guichardie promised to think it over and added that when the contract was sealed she herself would give Colette a wedding gift that would make him sit up and take notice.

Two days later her weekly tea gave her an opportunity to affirm her unfailing prestige. Standing on the terrace, her cane in her hand, her fan hanging from her waist, and her lorgnette around her neck, with Anne de Saviniac at her right and Valentine Romilly at her left, she watched Colette and André set out for their tennis. In a loud voice which silenced all conversation, she pronounced distinctly:

"A *very* handsome couple! "

From the silent acquiescence of the two mothers, Périgord concluded that this marriage was arranged, and that Madame de La Guichardie could add a fifty-fourth to her victories. Périgord was not mistaken. Saviniac's only reservation was that since his son was still very young, they would have to wait until the boy had finished his studies and his military service.

When they were leaving la Guichardie, Gaston Romilly suggested that André de Saviniac come to dine at Preyssac. He himself would drive him home about ten.

"Good heavens, what have we for dinner?" Valentine wondered, worried. She thought hard; she had ordered a thick soup, a duck, a cream cheese. It would be easy to add an omelette with mushrooms and to open a *pâté*

Yes, the meal would be worthy of Périgord. Her momentary worried look vanished.

Colette thanked her father with a glance. Xavier de Saviniac, who had just won ten francs at bridge, was very satisfied with life and made no objection. Anne de Saviniac led Valentine off into the now deserted dining-room and embraced her.

14

AT PREYSSAC THE evening was quiet and peaceful. The conversation at dinner would have been full of interest for anyone who wanted to study the nature of the two sexes. André, a newcomer who had scarcely been introduced into this family circle, had immediately joined Gaston on the "men's side," the side of military matters, generalities, theories, and political doctrines; Valentine sat silent, and Colette, very proud of her father's intelligence and of her fiancé's, was just a bit piqued at being neglected and was vexed because there were some things she did not understand. She tried to catch André's eye, and he smiled at her from time to time, but he did not address her. By the time dessert arrived, Valentine had tired of the game and tried to enrol Colette on the "women's side," cutting into the men's discourse with comments about the guests at la Guichardie and the mistakes of the cook.

"Don't you think it's wonderful, Colette, that I can have mushrooms all year round now?" she inquired of her daughter.

But Colette refused to be drawn out. She discouraged

her mother's attempts at alimentary conversation by politely cold monosyllables and eagerly followed the men who were reconstructing the world.

As they left the table, the Romillys suggested spending the rest of the evening in the garden. The day had been quite warm. As soon as the sun had set a fresh breeze had come from the valley. Shooting stars lit up the sky with a brilliant streak of gold that died instantly. Crickets chattered in the grass. Glow-worms lit their tiny lanterns. Grey and silent, the bats flew close to their heads. In the valley, trains crawled toward Périgueux, their luminous length looking like enormous glow-worms.

"We'll not force our uninteresting talk on you," said Gaston to the young people. ". . . You have a thousand things to say to each other, I've no doubt. Go for a stroll. . . . Take him down the sycamore path, Colette; the moonlight should be lovely there."

Colette had taken André's arm and the younger generation set off rapidly for the sycamore path, while the more sentimental generation of forty sat silently watching the field of stars. For the younger generation, this evening was not nearly as moving as the older generation thought. Colette and André had considered themselves engaged for a long time, and the consent of their families was a mere formality. As soon as they were under the sycamores, André slipped his arm around Colette's waist in an easy and familiar gesture.

"Your parents are nice," he said.

"Aren't they? Particularly my father. I think he's awfully intelligent."

"Yes. He drags his explanations out a little too far, but he certainly knows a great deal."

"And besides," said Colette, "he is so sure, so good.

... Really, I admire him as much as one can possibly admire a father. . . . Only, I can never chat with him as though he were a person like us. I always have the feeling that I must be careful to stay away from certain subjects. . . . Have you noticed that he looks a little like a bird that has been injured? I wonder why."

"It probably all goes back to their past."

"But that's nothing at all. . . . Dad did the right thing by mother, and by me. . . . There's nothing to hide. . . . No, sometimes I have a fleeting impression that it's something else. . . . But what? . . . Don't you think it absurd that they had Madame de La Guichardie ask me never to speak of the past. . . . That makes conversation with them so difficult."

"What I cannot understand is how they could avoid it during your childhood. . . . There must have been some extraordinary things in your life. You never saw your relatives in Normandy. How did they explain that? "

"They didn't explain it. When I was a very little girl I wondered why my grandmother at Pont-de-l'Eure never gave any sign of life, nor sent me any presents. . . . The year of my first communion I asked Mother about it (because it seemed to me that after all Grandmother Romilly would surely take the trip to Périgord for an occasion which was so big for me). Mother gave me some evasive reply. . . . I understood that I mustn't mention it, that our two families never saw one another. . . . But nobody ever told me so outright. No, I tell you, my parents have been kindness itself, but mystery, too."

"Are you ever bored with them? "

"Bored? No. . . . Of course, as you could see at dinner, they are not very amusing. They are still

terribly in love. . . . They live only for each other and that makes them egotistic. . . . Then too, I often have an impression that my mother has stifled my father. She likes the monotony of her life. She doesn't need anything new. But, on the other hand, if Dad had been able to lead another life, he would have been brilliant; he has read everything; he has ideas on practically everything . . . but after all, what can you expect here? . . . What do you suppose they are saying, right now, on their terrace? My mother is probably saying: 'We really should cut down some of those trees. What's the point of having the most beautiful view in the country if we're going to smother it under the sycamores?' Dad will reply, 'A car has just stopped in front of the Chardeuil post office.' "

"Why do they say that? "

"No reason, just to be saying something, to feel that the other is near . . . besides, all that I have said is really unfair. I have had wonderful parents. They've always let me do pretty much as I pleased. . . . As soon as I finished my studies Dad gave me a horse. . . . That has meant a lot to me, here."

"Do you ride alone? "

"Of course. Every morning I go out with my two dogs. . . . I visit the peasants and they tell me all their troubles. . . . They all know me. . . . For miles around they call to me: 'Good morning, Mam'zelle Colette.' And then, I have been very interested in the farm. Once I hatched chickens in an incubator. Do you know, I kept them in my dressing-room so I wouldn't forget to turn the eggs over. . . . The duck you had at dinner was one of my flock. I have also experimented with seeds. No one had ever thought of growing artichokes here at Preyssac, for example. I

finally succeeded. . . . Since I had to follow books, it was rather like groping in the dark, and I have had a lot of disappointments, but I have learned a lot, and have had a lot of fun. That's what makes life interesting, don't you think—all the little things we do. . . . Look, that path of moonlight over Chardeuil. Pretty, isn't it? "

"I suppose," he said dreamily, "that I'll make a good many mistakes, too, with all my theoretical agriculture."

"Oh, you can't help it. . . . You'll see; in this country, the real difficulty is doing your own farming. As soon as you stop renting the land to tenants and try to work with hired help, the livestock dies, the trees get some disease. . . . And then, too, the peasants have a horror of anything new. . . . If you buy manure for them they tell you: 'That will bring cockroaches.'"

"I shan't ask them their opinion."

"Then you'll make a big mistake. It's simply amazing what they know by instinct. For example: one week it was very hot; then it rained for a whole day; naturally I thought there would be mushrooms in the forest and I went out. . . . Well, I was all alone and there wasn't a mushroom to be found. . . . Another day, after a short shower that lasted just a few minutes, all the farm children went out to pick mushrooms and they were right: the woods were full of them."

"Why? "

"Oh, it's all very complicated. . . . It all depends on the moon. Another thing, when there is a storm and the farmers have hens sitting, they hurry and put a silver fork in the nest. Why? I don't know. . . . But it's a fact that the chicks are saved."

"Really? Yes, it's possible. . . . There must be

some scientific explanation that someone will find some day."

"You're just like Dad. He loves to explain things. Something else. On Rogation days, the peasants tie bunches of straw around the trees to protect them from pests. It seems that they have been doing that for two thousand years. . . . Well, Dad discovered that it is a very wise precaution, because when the caterpillars wriggle up the trunk they are confronted by this obstacle and stop. Then all the farmers have to do is to pull down the straw bundles and burn them and the chrysalises are destroyed. Clever, isn't it? "

"How clever you are, you and your father. . . . You are going to be a big help to me when I start working Breuilh. . . . That's no small enterprise."

"Oh, with the two of us, it will work out fine."

"It doesn't frighten you to think of living in the country? "

"In the first place, with you, nothing frightens me; besides, I have always wanted to spend the rest of my life in Périgord. . . . And then, I love your parents; they are so strange and nice. . . . Madame de La Guichardie showed me a picture of your mother when she was married. She was terribly pretty. She's still charming. . . . The only thing is, her mind seems about twelve. . . . I have to talk to her like to a little girl. . . . Oh, that reminds me, the other night I had the funniest dream. . . . I saw your father in the garden at Breuilh, and suddenly a man in a top-hat came in—a sort of schoolmaster—followed by about three hundred children who began to wreak havoc on the strawberry plants. Your father's anger woke me up."

She burst out laughing and André kissed her. On

the terrace where he was sitting with Valentine, Gaston heard her laugh.

"How gay they are. Whatever can they be talking about?"

"What do you suppose young people talk about when they love each other? They are making plans for the future; they are kissing each other; that's all as it should be."

"Of course, but it always makes me a little sad to realize that when she is with us Colette is rather serious and quiet, and yet when she is with others she is so full of spirit."

"Perhaps," said Valentine, "we are very boring?"

"Do you think so? Are you bored with me?"

"Never for a moment," said Valentine, sincerely.

"Are you sorry to think that we will soon be alone?"

"On the contrary, I'll make a confession; I adore Colette. Well, since she is going to live so near to us, and we are really not losing her, I am just as glad that she is leaving the house."

"How can you say that?"

Silence fell between them. Across the meadows, two dogs in neighbouring villages took turns baying at the moon.

"Oh, I almost forgot," said Valentine. "In this morning's mail there was a letter from Louis Gontran. . . . You know, Marguerite Henri's son. . . . He tells me that the eldest of his seven sons is returning from his military service and wants to set himself up in business. . . . It seems that he has found a little printing shop near Sarlat, but he needs some capital. He asks us if we can help him."

"How much?" asked Gaston.

"Thirty thousand francs."

"No!" said Gaston. "I've had just about enough of the Gontrans. They're carrying things a little too far. I haven't got thirty thousand francs to throw out of the window. Colette's marriage is going to cost a pretty penny."

"I'm not asking you to give them anything. I told you about it merely so that you would know what's going on. I already intended to write and say that we couldn't do anything for them."

They could hear the young couple approaching. They stopped near the bench where Romilly was sitting. Suddenly a blinding flash of light blazed across the terrace.

"Look there, André," said Gaston. "A car has stopped outside the Chardeuil post office. From just that spot the headlights shine through to Preyssac."

Colette, holding André's arm, nudged him gently. Then the four of them fell silent. What was there to say? Colette and André were thinking that their life would roll out calm and smooth in their country domain. Gaston was dreaming about the agreeable monotony of the ten years that had passed. How many times he had sat on this same terrace watching the stars turn in the heavens. In a few months the winter constellations would come up over the hills. He knew that a few minutes later, just shortly before ten o'clock, a large owl would fly past, back from its nightly hunt, and would find its nest up in the pigeon tower. His greatest anxiety, that of Colette's birth, was visibly solved with André's presence. He felt Valentine sitting next to him on the bench and tenderly put his arm around her. An instant later the owl passed by.

Gaston Romilly got up and went after the car to take

young Saviniac back to Breuilh. Colette went with them, and Valentine, who found the night air a little too chilly, went up to her room to wait for them.

15

THE END OF September came and the Saviniacs left for Paris. In order to make the separation less painful, it had been agreed that Colette's parents would take her to Paris for Christmas and that André would spend his Easter vacation at Breuilh.

October was very lovely. Colette and her father took long walks in the woods. Many of the trees still had their summer foliage, but already in the meadows bordering the Loue, the poplars were losing their bright yellow leaves. They would glide and whirl through space for a moment, and finally drop to the ground where they nestled down in the pale green swathes of hay, looking like shiny gold nuggets. The light birches with their white trunks were almost stripped, and their yellow leaves were shot with delicate brown lines. Here and there a cherry tree made a sharp red incision in a still green hedge, and the chestnuts bordering the drive made a guard of honour leading up to the house at Preyssac.

By November the frosts had come and the chrysanthemums were lost. On the twelfth of November, Gaston drove his daughter to Périgueux for her lesson in design. Valentine telephoned to Madame de La Guichardie and asked if she might see her alone some time in the afternoon.

"Alone?" asked the old lady. "... Well, to tell you the truth, I was expecting Pierre Marcenat. ... But surely ~~he won't~~ bother you."

"Oh, please," said Valentine. "... In that case, I'll come about three if you don't mind ... after lunch. ... Will that put you out?"

"No, ~~not~~ at all. ... Anyway, I can ask Marcenat not to come until tomorrow; he doesn't have anything to do. ... That way, we can take our time, you and I."

"Forgive me for accepting," said Valentine, "but you are really doing me a great favour. I have never needed your advice more than I do now."

Her insistence and the dejection in her voice aroused Madame de La Guichardie's curiosity. For the rest of the morning she wondered what else could have happened to upset her neighbours.

"Strange people, these Romillys," she thought. "... Affectionate, respectful, but strange. ... One can see that they really don't belong to our world."

She built a hundred different hypotheses and organized a campaign for each one. Long before the time agreed upon she was seated in her Gothic throne, looking through the newspaper without the slightest idea of what she was reading, and waiting for her guest.

When Valentine did arrive, her emotion, her worried expression, proved that Madame de La Guichardie had not been wrong in supposing that there must have been a very serious reason for this visit.

"What has happened, Valentine?" she said. "You look as though you had lost your last friend. Have our young sweethearts quarrelled in their letters?"

"No, it's not that," said Valentine, sitting in a low

armchair near her old friend. "No, this has nothing to do with Colette's marriage, but with Gaston and me."

"What!" exclaimed Madame de La Guichardie in despair. "Now don't tell me that you have come here to inform me that you and Gaston were never married after all. . . ."

In spite of her trouble, Valentine could not suppress a smile.

"No, you have nothing else to learn on that score. But once again I'll have to tell you a long story about us before I can ask your help. . . . It's such an old story that I had almost forgotten it, until something happened this morning to bring it back to me, something that I never dreamed could have any place in my life . . . But here it is. . . . I can't ignore it. . . ."

She sighed deeply, gazed out of the window for a few seconds at the vast meadow of la Guichardie, at the violet-coloured roofs in the distant village. Then she continued:

"This morning Maître Passaga, the notary at Chardeuil, asked me to come in and see him. . . ."

She stopped short.

"No, that's not the way to begin. . . . I have talked about my childhood and my years in Paris so often that it hardly seems necessary to bring them up again. But there are a few details which you have not heard, and which you must know to understand what Passaga's talk meant. . . . You know that when Mother died I was left alone in the world, with no hope of assistance from anyone but my Uncle Vincent, who took me in. . . . In spite of his rather elegant appearance, my uncle was a real peasant, whose presence in a dress-making establishment surprised me for a long time. He had found a job with Rosie quite by accident, but

somehow he had managed to make himself indispensable. The cunning of the sharp-witted peasant, his ability to keep silent, had served him well with this demanding woman. He soon learned how to flatter her, which she adored, and in a very few years had established himself as her right-hand man. Therefore, he didn't have much trouble getting me a job there, and this was the first big event in my life. Did you by any chance ever know Madame Rosie in Paris? "

"Did I ever know her!" interrupted Madame de La Guichardie. ". . . I had her make all my suits. . . . Oh, a good thirty years ago. . . . I can still hear her. . . . She was a good-looking woman with a harsh voice, who treated her fitters like so many dogs."

"Yes, you describe her perfectly. . . . Rosie was the daughter of an inn-keeper in Corrèze, and had been launched in Paris by a very rich man (a banker, I believe). He had discovered her on one of his trips and had taken her away with him. Much too ambitious, and at bottom, too serious, to be content with the life of a demi-mondaine, she had demanded that her friend set her up in business and had opened a little shop in the Rue Croix des Petits Champs. She was not a particularly good seamstress, nor was she even a very good designer, as I was. But she did have a sort of genius for anticipating the needs and whims of women. That was when the style ran to frills, sweeping skirts, and leg-o'-mutton sleeves. . . . As you know, Rosie invented the 'tailleur,' with its short jacket and trailing skirt. . . ."

Madame de La Guichardie sighed in recollection.

Valentine continued:

"Rosie came into my life at the time when she could

transform it most easily. I had some good taste, and a certain technique in design, but as I watched that woman work, I realized that technicians are merely the instruments—the designer is everything. . . . Although I was there for more than six years, it was really only in the last two that I was in close contact with her work. Those two years taught me everything. I can still see her standing beside a half-nude model, draping the material on her.

“She was tireless. When she was preparing her collections, she would keep us in the fitting rooms until nine and ten o’clock at night. But it was so interesting we didn’t even think of complaining. At dinner time she would send out to some big restaurant on the Avenue de l’Opéra for our meals. At such times no pleasure in the world could have dragged her from her work. She led a very ‘bourgeois’ life. She had very few lovers, and chose them not for love but because they could bring new capital. One day I heard her say to my uncle: ‘I’ve got too many things to do—I can’t be bothered with a flock of admirers hanging around.’ I was afraid of Rosie because she had a terrible temper and would not stand for argument, but I had the greatest admiration for her.

“How well I remember those solemn moments when she would come to judge an important dress. The fitter would be on her knees, trembling, hopeful, the little apprentice was given no more thought than a pin cushion, and the customer herself was treated like some inanimate object that Rosie would slowly turn around. ‘My dear child,’ she would say to the fitter, ‘how many times must I tell you to interpret your models? Can’t you see that when you set your tucks there, you widen the back and destroy the whole line? Now look; what’s

our problem? It's perfectly simple; we've got an irregular hip formation here; so you have to be careful to keep the back smooth and bring the fullness to the front. . . . Oh, go and get me the girl who takes care of Baroness Choin. . . . I'll explain what I want to her. It's obvious that you can't do it.'

"These long monologues of Rosie's, the desire to satisfy her, later the wish for revenge, and a prodigious effort to learn her craftsmanship—that was my girlhood. . . . But before that, there was the even harder period when I was only a beginner in the business, at the mercy of the star fitter or the complaints of a customer. . . .

"I beg you not to judge too severely what I am going to tell you now. . . . Believe me, I often criticize unindulgently the woman I am today (and whom you sometimes praise). . . . But for the unhappy little girl that I was then, I can feel only pity. . . . Try to understand the confusion of a child of sixteen, who had been very carefully brought up, who sincerely wanted to remain a good girl, and who found herself suddenly plunged into a world where her own moral code had no meaning. The only examples I had before me were the mannequins. Most of them were friendly and generous, but they needed a man's patronage for the bare necessities of food and shelter. The great sign of virtue in their eyes was to have only one lover at a time, and not to change too often. Can you blame them? They made three hundred francs a month. With this they had to buy their own make-up, keep themselves in silk stockings; nearly all of them lived some distance away and had to pay cab fares. . . . Besides, they wanted to keep their jobs, and I know that Uncle Vincent would have been very annoyed if

they had been too unresponsive to the advances of the big buyers or had refused the dinner invitations of visiting American businessmen. He did his best to preach me the art of submitting to the desires of men. 'You can't refuse,' he would say. 'I'll lose all my clients if you make them angry. . . . I'm not asking you to do anything dishonourable or impossible. . . . You don't have to give in to them, take care of yourself, of course, but do it laughingly, good-naturedly.' "

"And you accepted his advice?" asked Madame de La Guichardie.

"No, but I sometimes regretted it. . . . You must remember that I was very young and very new to all that. A dinner in a restaurant, or an evening at the theatre would have been very exciting for me. . . . Above all, I was perplexed. . . . My mother had taught me that the only road to success was through hard work, and suddenly I discovered that for a woman, at least, this was rarely true. It's hard, you know, growing up. . . . You feel that everything is unjust and that you are so weak. . . . Oh, you get along all right. . . . Most of the Americans did not insist when I refused to go out with them, and they were rarely angry. And I adopted the ruse of telling them that 'I had a friend' to discourage their attentions. It was not true, and my uncle often took me to task for what he called my 'prudishness.' 'What are you waiting for?' he would say. 'What do you expect? Surely you know that you'll never build up a career like Rosie's by designing models. . . . She was cleverer than you, but if she hadn't found some capital—and you know how she got it—she would never have had a chance. If a girl is lucky enough to have your figure, she should make the most of it. How old are

you? Twenty? Well, in ten years you will be sorry that you lost such precious time. You've got to take life as it comes.' "

Valentine stopped a minute. Already the light was fading. Through the window she could see a large cloud whose edges were touched with flame by the sunset. Across the meadow the shadows were closing in over the hills, the villages, and the forest; gradually their outlines lost their form and melted into the night. Valentine trembled and for a long time she seemed lost in reverie. Then she took up the story in a calm, even voice.

"One of the biggest backers of the Maison Rosie was an industrialist from Lyons, a certain Martin-Bussière."

"Wait a minute," said Madame de La Guichardie. "... It seems to me that I have met him. . . . No, the one I knew was a stockbroker; he lived in the Avenue d'Eylau."

"That's right, his brother was a stockbroker in Paris," said Valentine. "The other, Adrien Martin-Bussière, lived in Lyons with his wife and his two sons. He had backed Rosie so that he could sell her his silks, and also so that he could get information from her on the next season's styles. It was important for him to know a long while ahead what materials were going to be fashionable. In that way he in turn could keep the big stores informed, and prepare his own collection—in short, stay in the swim. When Rosie finally let me do some designing, she naturally sent Martin-Bussière to me, and I suggested several patterns which sold well and pleased him enormously. . . . This was in 1906, when he was a man of about forty-five, likable, courteous, and agreeable. I can't say that he was

exactly handsome. . . . He was bald, rather small, had an unusually high voice, and a very nice manner. . . . It's a strange word to use to describe a man, but I can't find any other that really fits the case at the moment: he was very graceful. . . .

"How can I explain what happened? To excuse myself in your eyes, I could tell you that I loved Martin-Bussièrè. . . . That would not have been impossible. . . . It would not have been hard to love him. . . . His weariness, his tired gestures—there was something rather touching about him. . . . Rosie was quite taken with him. . . . My Uncle Vincent even tried to spread the story that she wanted to marry him twenty years before. That was most improbable. Martin-Bussièrè would never have taken anyone like Rosie to Lyons, which was almost like a holy city for him. . . . At any rate, as far as I am concerned, I would be lying if I told you that I loved him. No, at first I had a great respect for him. You see, in that business, which had become the centre of the world for me, he was all-powerful. Add to that the fact that he really deserved his authority, because he was a clever man, hard working, with a very sure taste. I really don't know how to picture him to you. . . . You would have to combine intellectual strength with physical weakness and add to that the fact that he was almost too prudent. It was only natural that such a man should make a great impression on the little twenty-year-old designer whom he suddenly seemed to take seriously.

"Whereas most of the men with whom my work threw me in contact tried to take me out, or to get me to go on a trip with them (which I continued to refuse in spite of my uncle's admonitions), Martin-Bussièrè

always treated me with absolute respect. You can imagine how astonished I was one day when we were alone in my office looking at some samples lying on the table, and I felt him put his arm around me. It seemed such a natural gesture that I thought I would be silly to make a scene; besides, he had not even interrupted his sentence, and the serious, almost technical tone of his conversation had not changed. We drew apart without his having said a word about this new attitude, but, every time we met after that, his familiarity grew.

"I have already told you that my Uncle Vincent was soon very jealous of me. The Maison Rosie was a nest of intrigue. One half of the personnel was eternally plotting against the other half. Rosie, woman of genius though she was, and in her own way a fine artist, made the mistake of listening to all the gossip that came to her ears. She believed the reports of the interested persons who said that success had gone to my head and that I was just waiting for the end of my contract to leave her employ and exploit her. Many clients had fallen into the habit of sending for me instead of Rosie to adapt the different models for them. When she became aware of this, her fury knew no bounds. Soon my life there became altogether unbearable.

"'If you don't like it here you can get out,' she would say to me. 'Then you'll know what a fool you were. As for me, I don't need anyone . . .'

"My Uncle Vincent accused me of compromising him with Rosie; although he hoped that I would be fired, he did not dare fire me himself. The Gontrans have always been a severe tribunal for cases of that kind. They are very family conscious, and the old aunts of Sarlat know how to make life miserable for a

rich Gontran who fails to help a poor Gontran. My uncle may have been too sly to attack me to my face, but he was certainly not above using underhand methods to annoy me. When Rosie railed against me, he would go one better, just so that she would not think him my ally and include him in my disgrace.

“Martin-Bussièrre, who came in every week, witnessed several of the scenes to which I had to submit. One day he said he would like to speak to me about my future but not within earshot of all of Rosie’s acolytes. He asked me to call at his hotel. I was taken unawares, because while I felt myself threatened, trapped, without friends, he represented enormous power. I went to see him.”

16

FOR A MOMENT the room was in absolute silence. In a gesture which was far from habitual with her, Madame de La Guichardie leaned over and stroked Valentine’s hair.

“Where was I?” she went on. “. . . Oh, yes, my visit to Martin-Bussièrre. For you to understand this man’s conduct, I’ll have to tell you more about him. I said that he was married. I knew his wife, who had all her clothes made by Rosie. She was a huge creature, so stout that she scarcely seemed to have human form, and she looked much older than her husband. But he used to say that she had very fine qualities, that she had been a good mother to his sons, and that it was to her that he owed his success. Her dowry had been

the factory in Lyons where he had first worked as an engineer.

"I don't know whether you would call this man's attitude hypocrisy or decency. It doesn't matter, really. The truth of the matter is that Martin-Bussi re had ceased to have any sensual life in his home and so sought it elsewhere. At the same time he insisted on keeping up appearances: he would let nothing change his social life or compromise him, no matter how lightly. It was this very discretion which won, for at that time I was not only chaste but prudish as well, or, if you prefer, prudent. Like him, I clung to my respectability. When he suggested setting me up in the dress-making business, my first answer was a rather curt refusal, for I saw quite clearly that he was offering me the very thing which I had so often condemned in other women. He was clever and persuasive. He overcame my objections, reassured me that he had no desire to *give* me the business, but merely wanted to back me because he had the greatest confidence in my ability, and besides, he hoped that the venture would prove to be as profitable for him as for me.

"You will say that I could have accepted his offer and repaid him simply by making a success out of the business? Theoretically, yes. But you must look at life a little more squarely and honestly. Working together brings a man and woman into constant contact. Familiarity of movement, intimacy . . . it all comes so slowly that it becomes perfectly natural before you are aware of the change . . . you take each further step almost without realizing it. . . . Finally a woman wonders if she isn't ungrateful and selfish to refuse the pleasure after having awakened the desire. Particularly when the man has almost seemed an absolute

monarch for more than five years, fear and respect combined paralyze your defences. . . . My only chance to resist lay in flight . . . and where could I go? The only business for which I had any training was unfortunately one of those where success depends on a solid backing. Go into another company? Rosie would have done everything in her power to ruin me. . . . She was clever and influential. With Martin-Bussière, on the other hand, life would be easy, interesting. . . . At last I gave in. . . .

"I would be lying if I tried to give you the impression that in becoming Martin-Bussière's mistress I had any feeling of committing a grave sin. . . . No, I was a little sad, like any young girl who had dreamed of consecrating her life to a great love and who suddenly finds herself the victim of outside influences forcing her to marry for money. . . . You must remember that I had spent several years in a world of rather lax standards where the models wandered around almost nude without anyone's giving them a second thought. Remember also, that this partnership was absolutely secret. Martin-Bussière did not want to be seen with me. I never went to a restaurant with him or to a theatre. At Rosie's he pretended to be surprised and sorry to hear that I had left. The agreement which bound him to the Maison Valentine was a secret document, and no one knew about it. Two days a week he came to dinner with me. I lived like a young woman who has her home in Paris and whose husband has factories in the country.

"I have often told you about the success of my business. I myself was amazed at its rapid growth. I had some very simple ideas about fashions. The lives of our customers at that time were changing: the

information. How? I never really knew. Some time after I left, she fired my Uncle Vincent. He had sworn that he never saw me, which was quite true, and that there was no one more indignant than he at what she chose to call my treason. She had replied, however, that she did not trust him any more; he would soon be able to get in my good graces and play a double game. Rosie considered herself unique, unreplaceable; she could never accept the idea that a younger competitor might be a creator, too. She was always suspecting me of plagiarism. Her acolytes kept her informed of a stream of infiltrations which flowed from one place to the other, and assured her that the entire success of the Maison Valentine was built on the inspirations that came from the Maison Rosie. All she could see was the fact that Vincent was a relative of her rival . . . therefore, he was sacrificed. I heard all about it from my uncle himself, who did not wait long before coming to reproach me for making him lose his position.

“ ‘You owe me some sort of compensation,’ he said. . . . ‘Take me in with you. I’ve been in this business for over twenty years; you have had no experience . . . I can give you valuable advice. . . .’

“Perhaps it would have been wiser to take him in, in spite of the horror which he inspired in me. Knowing his indiscretion and his curiosity, however, I was afraid that he would annoy Martin-Bussièrre, and I sent him away on the pretext that my budget did not provide for as big a salary as he deserved. That was a mistake, for from that day on he was an implacable enemy. He put spies among my girls, took my star fitter away from me, did everything in his power to set the tradespeople against me. Did he already suspect my relationship with Martin-Bussièrre? Possibly. At any rate,

Rosie or my uncle, it doesn't matter who . . . but it is a fact that someone sent several anonymous letters to Madame Martin-Bussi re in Lyons telling her about the part I played in her husband's life. She made repeated and violent scenes. I could see that he wanted to leave me.

"It was at just this time that Georges Delandre, from whom I bought much of my woollens, brought Gaston Romilly to my shop quite by chance. You know how sweet and kind he is. I can't tell you how much I liked him from the very first. We worked together a few times; I got him to experiment with several materials which I had wanted to try out for a long time. We saw each other often. It was soon evident that we had similar tastes, the same rhythm to our lives. He told me that he came to Paris every week, usually alone, and asked me to have dinner and go to the theatre with him once in a while. I was beginning to tire of the closed life that Martin-Bussi re imposed on me. I accepted.

"Soon Gaston was madly in love with me. How can I explain his kindness? He was as sentimental, as generously na ve, as Martin-Bussi re was prudent. He had only known me two weeks before he started talking about marrying me, admitting at the same time that it would not be easy, because his parents, on whom he was dependent, had rather narrow ideas regarding his choice of a wife. Do you understand? Through him I finally knew the pleasant sensation of being admired, of being loved for my good qualities. And then, I don't know if you have ever felt this or not, but it seems to me that if I am to love a man very much, he has to be both stronger and weaker than I. Gaston was certainly both. In some ways he was the

most capable man in the world; in other things, he was a child. Besides, why look for subtleties? I loved him. When he was planning to go to Venice for his vacation, and very timidly asked me to go with him, I did not hesitate for a moment, although I was certain that in giving myself to him I was losing all chance of marrying him."

17

VALENTINE LOOKED UP at Madame de La Guichardie.

"Please forgive me," she said, "this story is longer than I had intended. Are you waiting for M. Marcenat? "

"No, I'm not," said the old lady. "I told Pierre not to come, and I am listening to every word you say. Go on, my dear. . . . So you weren't Gaston's mistress before you went to Venice with him? "

"No, but I was in Venice. . . . And it was something completely different from my first experience. I had submitted to Martin-Bussièrre. This time I gave myself up joyously, lovingly, and, far from knowing any remorse, I felt happy rather than uneasy. . . . I had found the man whom I could love all my life. . . . But what would the consequences be? Gaston, as generous as ever, began to talk at once about marriage, plans for the future, children. . . . I was sceptical, and considered his proposals more a sign of sincere love than a serious engagement. The Delandres had described the Romilly family to me. I didn't expect anything; I refused to think of the future. The present

was giving me a taste of happiness—the first in all my life; I wanted to drink deeply of it. . . .

“You know men well enough to guess that this trip to Italy, my evenings out, my suddenly mysterious life, were all that Martin-Bussière needed to find me interesting again. It was at this moment I made the mistake of not leaving him, although I was already in love with another man. But you must realize that my position was not easy. I owed him everything. My feelings toward him were those of gratitude and friendship. My interests in the business were so closely bound to his that in my youth and innocence I did not see how I could break away. And yet, today, I know that this weakness was a grave error, and the real cause of the disaster which has forced me to come to you with this story.

“I came back from Italy in May. In June, for the first time in his life, Martin-Bussière asked me to go to England with him for a few days. When I came back in July, I realized that I was pregnant. That frightened me. It wasn't that I was afraid of having a child. On the contrary, I had hoped for it. But to find myself pregnant at a time when I was getting ready to undertake a new life posed some terrible problems. I had not the slightest doubt but that the child was Martin-Bussière's. I went to him first with my fears. I was disappointed by his attitude, and, to be quite frank, I found it cowardly. Oh, he didn't deny his probable paternity, but he said that if his wife learned that he had a child by me, she would destroy both of us. She had the means of doing it. We should have to be more careful than ever.

“‘Naturally,’ he added, ‘I shan't let you want for anything. I shall make sure that you have every care

when the child is born, and I shall see to its education afterwards. But there must be no mention of my name. I have important interests to safeguard. At Lyons I hold a social and political position which must not be compromised. I am Vice-President of the Lyons Chamber of Commerce; I can be its President. I can tell you that it is very probable that I shall be made a Commander of the Legion of Honour, once I am President of the Chamber of Commerce. . . . For that I need my wife's family, who are extremely influential. I simply cannot risk a quarrel with Madame Martin-Bussière. Another thing, my sons must never lose their respect for my paternal authority.'

"Thus, at a time when he saw me in a dangerous position, he could only think of himself. When he left me I was in despair.

"Gaston came to see me at the end of the week. I had told him about my trip to England, saying that I was going alone and that I was planning to get a stock of Scotch plaids. He still knew nothing about Martin-Bussière's existence and I had decided to tell him as soon as I got back. I had barely started what I intended to be my confession, when an awkward, ambiguous word of mine told him that I was carrying a child. He was so overjoyed, so delighted and tender toward me that before I knew it the conversation had veered off in an entirely different direction. I should have protested, explained; but you know as well as I do that when we poor human beings find ourselves in a difficult situation, we usually take the easiest way out. When Gaston left the next day, he was convinced that he was going to be a father, and promised me he would recognize the child as his until such a time as we could be married.

“Here again, I must beg you not to be too hard on me. . . . At no time did I have any intention of duping the man whom I loved and respected. But as you know, we are never faced with events and problems that have a simple solution. At the beginning I wanted to tell Gaston everything. The conversation took a turn that prevented it. Finally, when I had a glimpse of the happiness that I might expect with him, reason became the accomplice of my desires. I convinced myself that I would ruin not only my own life, but perhaps his too, if I gave in to scruples which were not even based on absolute certainty. And if, contrary to what I thought, this child was his? The whole time I carried it, I tried to believe that it was the child of the man I loved.

“I even tried to influence nature. I had heard that a woman’s environment during pregnancy can have some effect on the physical aspect of her child. I filled my rooms with pictures of Gaston. I asked him for a photograph of himself as a small boy and I kept it constantly before my eyes. I hoped against hope, particularly at the time when Colette was born. Romilly was with me constantly, anxious, devoted, while Martin-Bussi re remained at once invisible and present, showering me with anonymous attentions, with flowers that had no cards, yet never coming forth to recognize his child. This was Gaston’s first thought and as soon as Colette was born he brought the doctor and one of the Delandres partners as his witnesses.

“Yet, not long after, Martin-Bussi re did come to see me very secretively. He brought gifts for the layette: a silver cup, an ermine coverlet. For a man as prudent and busy as he, it was certainly a proof of his love to think that he had given even a few minutes to buying

these things, and had run the risk of choosing them himself. I received him coldly.

“‘If it is true that you have had some affection for me,’ I said, ‘there is only one way for you to show it now: don’t ever come back. . . . You won’t have much trouble learning to get along without me; I have scarcely seen you for the last seven or eight months. . . . As for me, you may know that I have made other plans.’

“I told him that another man had come into my life. He seemed to be both mortified and relieved. Obviously the idea of an illegitimate daughter was so foreign to the ‘respectable’ side of life which I did not know, that he was only too happy to hear that he was now relieved of all responsibility. He asked to see the child; she looked like all babies, her face a little red ball with not a single distinguishable feature. When he came back to my bed, he seemed very moved. He told me that I could always depend upon his help. I answered that I would ask him for nothing, that I had made my decision and had promised myself to remain faithful to Romilly, and that my sole desire from now on was to owe him nothing. He protested, swore that I did not owe him a thing. I insisted and told him that I intended to pay back the money he had put into my business just as soon as I could; he replied that I must not even think of that, that the many suggestions I had made had repaid him ten times the original sum, and besides, the conversation was making me feverish and that he would see me when I was well again. As a matter of fact, from this moment he disappeared from my life. Later, when I sold the business, I sent him a cheque for the money he had loaned me nine years before, along with the interest. He replied with an

embarrassed letter and returned my cheque. I explained that I was getting married and that it would be impossible for me to submit my accounts to Romilly until they were all clear. He finally kept the money.

“Later, I learned that the money had been turned over to my Uncle Vincent. He had been trying for a long time to get next to Martin-Bussi re. Unable to find a job similar to the one he had had with Rosie (and which, according to him, he had lost because of me), he had been vegetating. How he managed to get the money he needed for a new venture I never knew exactly, but a shop called Vincent Gontran and Company opened on the Champs Elys es shortly after the war. And so my uncle, whose underhand complicity I had refused, finally succeeded in getting some money out of the relationship between Martin-Bussi re and me. I never wanted to see him again. . . . This whole episode fills me with shame and disgust. . . .”

18

“MY LIFE BECAME more and more closely bound to Gaston’s. He treated me as his wife, introduced me to several of his friends, and followed his daughter’s progress with devoted interest. This daughter was Colette, of course. She loved Gaston. I have often thought that she even preferred him to me. When she took her first steps at twenty months, she ran to him more eagerly than to me. You can imagine my mingled feelings of happiness and anxiety when I watched these two together.

“My main desire was for her to look like him. How many hours haven't I spent alone in the evening sitting at her bedside trying to see the colour of his eyes, the formation of his mouth, the wave in his hair. Alas! as Colette grew up, the illusions I had built for myself became obviously absurd. To watch a child whom you adore and follow the slow development of an expression which you fear, a silhouette you want to forget. . . . To loathe the invisible workman who, with a pitiless art, reveals those fugitive traits of resemblance between a tiny girl and a mature man. . . . To reproach a child for an innocent and involuntary gesture, guilty only because it recalls the gestures of another, and then to reproach yourself for this injustice. . . . Those are the miseries which I had to bear for many years, miseries which were all the harder because I could tell no one about them.

“At the time of Colette's engagement, we told you about our rather dramatic marriage during the war, when Gaston was on a short leave. At that time I almost admitted everything: I could not bring myself to do it. It seemed to me that the confession would be not only useless, but cruel, too. A priest whom I consulted agreed with me; perhaps I gave him too strong an impression of the doubt in my mind. If I did, it was not intentional, for by this time I had no more doubt. Colette had Martin-Bussi re's fragile grace, his fine features, rather than Gaston's slightly massive vigour. Besides, after the marriage and Colette's legitimization, any confession would have been unnecessarily cruel. The only thing I could do was to forget the past.

“Forget the past . . . That sounds difficult, impossible, almost, doesn't it? and yet how easy it is if

the scene of one's life changes completely. . . . In 1919 we came to live here in this country where nobody knew our story. Believe me, in the past few years I have often wondered if this entire affair really happened. . . . Who was Martin-Bussi re? A phantom, the memory of a dream. I was no longer haunted by the fear of meeting him suddenly as I had been in Paris. I was delivered from my old mistake, safe. . . . It has often surprised you that we took so few trips to Paris, that we were so faithful to P rigord. I have just given you the secret reason for that. Our country domain meant security for me, an inviolable shelter. I can't describe to you the feeling of redemption that Preyssac gave me, my happiness at being far away from all those men, those jealous women who had spied on me for so long. In Paris I had known the life of the business world, the vain struggle to succeed, to stifle others; had been engulfed in the cries of the salesgirls, the bickerings of the customers, the jangling of the telephone. At Preyssac I came into contact with hard work and the regular course of the seasons which carried me back to my childhood. I loved the monotony of the walks that we took every morning in the same drive of chestnut trees, and summer evenings under the stars seated on the terrace with my husband and my little girl beside me. In a word, I was happy. What had I been looking for anywhere else?

"Very rarely, a brief incident would open the wound, as stormy weather will irritate a touch of rheumatism which you had thought cured. A movement of Colette's would cause me an anguish that she never guessed. That way she has of setting her elbow on her knee and leaning her head on her hand, that was an habitual gesture of Martin-Bussi re. . . . Colette had Martin-

Bussière's voice, precise, high-pitched, and imperceptibly tinged with I don't know what strange accent. But such things were unimportant. I was delighted to note that if Colette resembled anyone, it was I. Gaston, obviously content, got along marvellously well with his daughter. He loved to watch her riding. I remember that while he was teaching her mathematics, he couldn't talk enough of her intelligence. 'A man's mind,' he would say. It got to the point where I was almost jealous of their perfect understanding. I would sometimes think that in as tragic a case as mine, a lie inevitably becomes almost a duty.

"Twice, however, during these years of happiness, the past reared its head, silent, menacing. It was rather like those fairy tales where evil spirits have acquired a right over the soul of the heroine and from a distance wield their power by signs that are visible to her alone.

"The first episode was so slight that I wouldn't even mention it except that it gave me a dreadful shock—surprisingly upsetting for such a simple thing—if I didn't think it would help you to see how nervous and weak I am when anything happens that concerns the frightful affair.

"You know that until about a year ago I designed Colette's dresses and had them made at Périgueux. One day she had gone in to order a dress for the Montal wedding and came home with several samples.

"'I couldn't make up my mind,' she said, '. . . I brought these two scraps to show you. . . . One is a Rodier and the other a Martin-Bussière. I liked the colours in the Martin-Bussière, which I have marked, but I was afraid that maybe you would think the design was too big.'

"I can't describe my horrible reaction when I heard

this name on her lips. I looked at her terrified. I was sure that she had pronounced the words Martin-Bussière with a heavier intonation and that she was watching me intently. Gaston was there, and I was so obsessed that it seemed to me that he was waiting, too . . . I could see his lips tremble. . . . What tricks our imagination can play! Colette and Gaston were leagues away from any secret thoughts which I might attribute to them. I took the two samples and looked at them for quite a while, giving myself time to find what I hoped would be a normal voice:

“‘I think the Martin-Bussière is hideous,’ I said vehemently. ‘I most certainly would never let you wear such a thing. . . .’

“Colette was stupefied at the violence of my words.

“‘But, Mother, I didn’t order it. I just wanted to know what you thought.’

“‘It’s *her* dress,’ Gaston interrupted gently. ‘Let her get what she wants.’

“Then, afraid I might give myself away, I changed front completely and insisted that she take this material. The whole scene must have left an impression of utter incoherence and injustice with Colette and Gaston.

“For a week I spent sleepless nights repeating Colette’s words over and over to myself, building a whole network of sinister hypotheses on this fragile coincidence. My daughter had been brought up at Preyssac, and it was unbelievable that she could know about my life before the war. Who knew the story? No one. Only the cleaning woman could have heard my last conversation with Martin-Bussière. Perhaps she had gossiped about it to the cook. I had a vague memory of this cook, whom I had discharged. I had not given her a thought for fifteen years. It seemed

to me that she had come from Périgord. I wasn't sure. Who else? Madame Fermat, my head fitter, to whom I had imprudently confided my troubles one day? But she was an excellent woman, incapable of treachery. My Uncle Vincent? Colette didn't even know him. For days I lived like those criminals who have long been sure that they have destroyed all trace of their acts, and who suddenly learn that their safety is threatened when they read an article in the newspaper and know that a fine net is slowly closing in around them because innumerable witnesses, unknown and apparently harmless, have all disclosed their small portion of the fatal truth.

"If Colette had heard something she would have asked me. . . . And yet, would she? Colette is a quiet child. . . . You can never guess what's going on in her mind. . . . Martin-Bussièrre, twenty years ago, had the same quiet, unfathomable face.

"For a long time my dreams were filled with scenes from my unhappy childhood; every night I saw my mother's death; the hypocritical and vulgar face of my Uncle Vincent; Rosie, and the fitters kneeling in the dressing-room; my first visit to Martin-Bussièrre, in his hotel room, with a picture of the Rape of the Sabine Women on the wall. . . . Then for about a week these dreams stopped and my nights were so calm that when I woke up in the morning I could not even remember the images that had passed through my mind. After this episode all the dreams that I thought forgotten surged up again across my memory. That lasted for two or three weeks. . . . Then, Colette's natural tone of voice, the peaceful routine of our life, Gaston's tranquillity, showed me how wrong I had been.

"The second episode was much more real, and hap-

pened when my father-in-law, Monsieur Déodat Romilly, died. Gaston had gone to Paris to meet his brothers, and to arrange the details of the will. Colette and I were to join him two days later with the car. We stopped for lunch at Argenton-sur-Creuse, in a little roadside hotel. As we went into the dining-room I suddenly came face to face with an elderly man, still elegant, but terribly emaciated. He had just finished eating and was standing by his table paying his bill. He spoke to me at once, but was so changed that I hardly recognized him. It was Martin-Bussiére.

"I could feel myself growing pale and wanted to leave. Then I realized that flight would seem ridiculous to Colette and to the chauffeur. Besides, Martin-Bussiére had come up to me.

" 'How do you do, Madame?' he said.

"Then he looked at Colette—a long, searching glance.

" 'Your daughter? How much she looks like you. . . .'

"For a moment I could hardly breathe. With Colette standing next to him, even the most casual stranger could see the relationship between them. For an instant their profiles were parallel, and in the gentle young face of my daughter I thought I could see the old woman she would be some day when she would look like this ascetic mask. He realized how upset I was and did most of the talking, to help me hide it. He told me that his two sons had been killed in the war. I had not heard about it; I felt a great pity for him and tried to tell him how sorry I was. He added that his wife had died the year before and that he now lived alone.

" 'It is sad,' he said. 'I envy you your happiness, for I know how happy you must be.'

"I could see that Colette was bored by this conversation. Standing near us, the manager was impatient, too, waiting to show us to our table. I finally said:

" 'Forgive me, we must eat in a hurry. . . . We still have some two hundred miles to go. . . .'

" 'And I have even more,' he said. 'I'm going up to Dax for a cure. . . . Well, good-bye. . . . I am very happy to have met you and to have seen your lovely daughter.'

"He kissed my hand, nodded to Colette, and turned to the manager, who gave him his change. As he left the room, he did not turn around. I was grateful to him for that.

" 'Who was that?' asked Colette.

" 'Someone I knew a long time ago,' I replied. 'You know, one of those faces that you recognize but can't attach a name to.' "

19

"THIS MEETING MADE a deep and painful impression on me. When we got to Paris, my husband kissed Colette and asked her all about the trip, listening to her with tender pleasure. Once again I told myself that I had committed a grave error in not confessing the truth and that some day this error would be punished. How? I couldn't imagine. But for eighteen years I have lived in the expectation of a sudden and pitiless blow from fate. I was not wrong. The blow fell today.

"This morning I had a short, vague telephone conversation with the notary at Chardeuil, Maître Passaga. He asked me to come in to see him, and if at all possible, to say nothing about it to my husband before my return. Under the pretext of going shopping, I went in to Chardeuil about eleven, in an uneasy frame of mind. I went to see Passaga. He received me with an air of mystery and handed me a letter which he asked me to read. It was written by a notary in Lyons, announcing the death of one of his clients, Monsieur Adrien Martin-Bussière, who had named as his sole heir Mademoiselle Colette Romilly, living in the Château de Preyssac, near Chardeuil (Dordogne). He had asked that before anyone else, Madame Gaston Romilly be informed of this legacy in a discreet manner. The Lyons notary added that an inventory of the deceased man's property had not yet been made, but it was a question of an enormous fortune. Monsieur Martin-Bussière had spent the last two years liquidating it to make it easily transferable.

"When I raised my eyes from the letter, I saw that the notary was watching me with ill-concealed curiosity and was waiting for an explanation. I thought I would faint. I would have welcomed anything that would have delivered me from this frightful conversation. But there was no way out. And so it seemed to me that only the truth, and the whole truth, with no reserve, would be believed and would save me. I told him all that I have just told you, only more briefly.

" 'Well,' he said, when I had finished, 'my poor Madame Romilly, this is a fine kettle of fish. . . . What are we going to tell your husband? '

" 'What? ' I cried, 'my husband? Surely you can understand that it is impossible to tell him anything.

I shall refuse this fortune in the name of my daughter, and the incident will be closed.'

" 'Unfortunately, it is not as simple as that,' he said, in an almost satisfied manner. 'Monsieur Martin-Bussière left no children. The testament therefore is absolutely legal, and since there is nothing contrary to morality, it is valid. Of course, article 775 of the Civil Code says that "no one is forced to accept a legacy which is left him." That is quite true, but applies only to adults. Since your daughter is a minor, your husband is her legal guardian. He is the only person who can act in her name. You do not have that right. And I will go even further: does your husband have the right—legal or moral—to refuse? It seems to me that it would be an extraordinary act of mismanagement and one that could later be attacked by your daughter when she comes of age, or by other parties concerned.'

" 'Oh, as for that,' I said, 'I can answer for Colette.'

" 'No, my good woman, you can't. . . . Your daughter may have changed by the time she comes of age; she might be influenced by her husband. . . . You are trying to look at this situation sentimentally, heroically; I see it as a lawyer. Therefore, the first thing you will have to do is to inform your husband, Monsieur Romilly. How will you go about it? What will you tell him? Can you invent a plausible relationship between the testator and your daughter? Note that the *de cujus* is extremely discreet and says nothing about the reason for the legacy. Fortunately that leaves the way open for whatever explanations you want to give.'

" 'Maître Passaga,' I replied, 'I have only one regret . . . that I did not tell my husband the whole truth

from the very first. I thought it was better that way. I know now that I was wrong. I'm certainly not going to begin again and make the whole thing worse. Perhaps I shall end by ruining my own life and his, but whatever happens, I shall tell no more lies.'

" 'You will make a big mistake, Madame,' he said, 'a big mistake. If, like me, you had witnessed all the dramas that are hidden within the most tranquil families, you would be less impulsive. At any rate, let me ask you one thing—don't hurry. You have quite some time. I can write to my colleague in Lyons and tell him that since I want to see you secretly, I shall be obliged to ask for a week longer. . . . So think things over, and then come back.'

"Our poor bodies have strength and resources that we learn to know only when we are in the gravest situations. Coming home I didn't know how I was going to face the two people whom, sooner or later, I am going to have to hurt terribly. Yet, I managed to pretend. In Chardeuil I bought a cake that they both love, a raisin pastry. . . . When they saw it they greeted me with thanks and silly little jokes. At lunch our home seemed no different from what it has always been, gay, calm, happy.

"But what a ghastly affair! I barely heard what they were saying. Desperately I looked for a plausible explanation. I toyed with the idea that perhaps Gaston would believe me if I told him that Martin-Bussi re was a distant cousin of my family. Then I realized the absurdity of it. He would check up, discover that I had lied, and the second failure would be even worse than the first. And anyway, was it plausible to think that a distant cousin would will his entire fortune to a girl he had never seen?

"At length I knew that my only hope lay in you. . . . You saved us a few months ago when you talked to Colette. You are the only one I can think of who can tell Gaston the truth, the part of the truth that you think is indispensable without making him suffer too much. I know what an unpleasant thing I am asking you. It's only too true. But you would do it better than anyone else. I shan't blame you if your explanation kills my husband's love for me. It will be such an unexpected blow for him, and so painful, that I cannot even imagine his reaction. At least you will be able to tell Gaston that I have never loved anyone but him, and that for me, as well as for Colette, he is the only person in the world who counts. It's for him to decide if he wants to sacrifice the present—which I believe pure and beautiful—to a past which has long been forgotten, and to which death has put such a definite end. Perhaps when he has recovered from the first shock, he will understand that such a sacrifice would be foolish, and unjust after this long time. . . . I can't believe that he will want to rule us out of his life. . . . But I'm not sure. . . . Sometimes with men, their pride can override their hearts. . . . At any rate, I ask no quarter. . . . I accept his decision in advance. I will do whatever he demands of me. . . . That's all. . . ."

Valentine fell silent. The sun had long since disappeared and the two women had talked on, unaware of the darkness. Madame de La Guichardie sniffed, and, looking for her handkerchief, dropped her cane. The clatter it made as it fell broke the silence that had become oppressive.

"My poor Valentine!" she said. "I have always loved you a great deal. . . . I think I love you even

more now. . . . I will certainly do what you ask. . . . But don't you think that it might be easier for your husband to hear these things from you than to have to blush at them before an outsider? "

"Perhaps," said Valentine. "I've already wondered about that. . . . But I can only repeat what I said to you last summer when we asked you to speak to Colette—I simply can't do it. . . . Why? . . . Don't ask me. . . . Perhaps because for my husband and for my daughter, I have changed too greatly from the woman whom these memories have brought back to life. . . . Whatever it is, nothing in the world could bring me to tell them this story. . . . That's why I came to you. And anyway, I don't think that Gaston will consider you an outsider. You already know so much about our life . . . it was he, not I, who first suggested that we ask you to tell Colette about her birth. . . . No, I repeat, you are my only hope."

A servant entered, carrying a lamp.

20

IN MADAME DÉODAT ROMILLY'S salon in Pont-de-l'Eure, the furniture was heavily covered all year round, except on Monday, which was the "day" on which the old mistress of the house received. This morning the servants had removed the covers from the armchairs and the tapestry chairs, they had opened the salon windows, and Madame Déodat herself had gone out to cut some chrysanthemums in the meagre garden that made a surprisingly country-like little nook between the ware-

house and the spinning mill. Since her husband's death she had ceased to be one of the autocrats of Pont-de-l'Eure and she entertained fewer guests. However, her children had left her the small house next to the factory, and she still had a group of faithful friends; her daughter, her daughters-in-law, the social workers, the wives of the men with whom she did business: Madame Pellerin, the wife of her notary; Madame Guérin, the wife of her doctor, and a few others.

Although these teas were never by invitation, it was a principle of Madame Déodat never to receive before four o'clock. Therefore, she was quite surprised to see the doctor's car stop before her door at about three. She had not sent for Guérin. But, none the less, she wouldn't mind seeing him because her liver was causing her some trouble. Someone was getting out, but it wasn't the doctor. It was Madame Guérin, as young and pretty as ever in her fur coat. She said a few words to her chauffeur, who drove away as she rang. Madame Romilly had treated this woman with pitiless severity twenty years before, when she had scandalized all Pont-de-l'Eure with her conduct; since then she had sung for the wounded during the war, had married the best doctor in town, and above all, had married her daughter Denise to the big financier Edmond Holmann. Madame Guérin had won her spurs. However, Madame Déodat still made her wait ten minutes in the empty salon to impress upon her the fact that it was not her custom to receive at three o'clock, and that she disapproved of this attempted familiarity. Then she went down to the salon.

Madame Guérin saw the cold, questioning expression on the old lady's face, and quite understood what it

meant. However, she countered with a bland look of guileless innocence.

"Good afternoon, dear Madame," she said. "Forgive me for bothering you so early, but I wanted to be the first to congratulate you on the good news."

Madame Déodat looked up at her caller uneasily, and leaned toward her. Her face was thin and pointed, and two angles, the nose and the chin, aligned in exactly parallel positions, seemed almost to threaten the visitor with their twin summits.

"The news?" she asked. . . . "What news?"

"Oh, come now . . ." said Madame Guérin.

"I can assure you I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about."

"Why, your granddaughter's engagement, of course."

Madame Romilly immediately thought of Marguerite or Claire, who were at an age to be engaged, and was highly indignant to think that one of her daughters-in-law had dared keep any marriage plans from her. . . .

"This is rather unexpected," she said. ". . . I know nothing about it. . . . Nothing at all. . . . Which of my granddaughters do you mean?"

"Why, Monsieur Gaston's daughter, of course. . . . Denise wrote this morning that Colette is going to be the Countess André de Saviniac. . . . I do congratulate you!"

The two triangles in Madame Romilly's face snapped into vertical position, and betrayed a complex reaction of scorn, relief, indifference, and curiosity.

"Oh, you had me worried. . . . I don't consider her my granddaughter."

"Not even now?" asked Madame Guérin, more and more radiant and sympathetic.

"Not now or ever. . . . What is this news that Madame Holmann wrote you? Probably another scrap of Paris gossip."

Madame Guérin leaned forward, happy, confidential:

"You would need a lot of imagination to accuse my poor Denise of spreading gossip. . . . No, as George says, who knows her even better than I, it would be easier to accuse her of not being in the least interested in other people's business. . . . Anyway, there is no guesswork to it. Monsieur de Saviniac, who is a colleague of my son-in-law Edmond—they are on several councils together—told Denise himself that his son is going to marry Mademoiselle Romilly. . . . You can see for yourself, it's first-hand information."

"And who are the Saviniacs?" demanded Madame Romilly.

"People of well-established nobility. . . . One of the oldest families in Périgord."

"Well, I suppose they have some roofs that need repairing. . . . It's quite understandable. . . . Thank God the Romillys have never been snobs," said Madame Déodat, forgetting that Madame Guérin, née d'Hocquville, had herself attempted a rather unfortunate first marriage for the sake of nailing some new tiles on some rather dilapidated roofs.

"Not at all," replied Madame Guérin, cutting deeper into the wound she had already opened. "My son-in-law says that the family possesses a good, solid fortune, and besides that, the young man is really charming."

Madame Romilly was meditating.

"It's unbelievable," she finally said. . . . "All that for the daughter of an adventuress, and one has so

much trouble making good marriages for the children of honourable families. . . .”

Madame Guérin disapproved of these violent attitudes within family clans, and her face saddened.

“Madame Déodat,” she said, “of course it’s not my place to give you advice, but I do hope that you are not going to be stubborn. . . . Heaven knows that if I had wanted to quarrel with my children I could have found some pretty serious complaints. . . . I didn’t want to, and today I’m glad . . . not for myself (thank God I have my husband and need no one else), but for my daughters. . . . Being on good terms with them, I can guide them from time to time. . . . Youth always needs guidance, whether they think so or not. . . . It seems that your granddaughter Colette is a lovely girl, well brought up, pretty, polite. . . .”

“And infinitely more desirable than your horrible Claire,” thought Madame Guérin, but she replaced the words with a brusque smile, for Madame Romilly’s word still carried some influence at the hospital, and George might need her some day.

“That is not the question,” said Madame Déodat. “She could be the Queen of Sheba and the Princess of Golconda rolled into one and I still would not recognize her as my granddaughter. . . . Oh, I know what I’m talking about. . . . As a matter of fact, I have nothing against the child, only against the mother. . . . Not because she was of a modest family, of course not. . . . If she had been a decent woman I would have been glad to receive her. . . . But I looked into her background . . . fortunately! . . . If I hadn’t the family would certainly have been nicely hoodwinked, for she’s nothing but an adventuress, that Gontran woman. . . .”

“And yet, she has made your son very happy. . . . He told me so himself when he was in Pont-de-l’Eure at the time of Monsieur Déodat’s death. . . . I had a long and intimate conversation with him then and he spoke of his daughter so sweetly. . . .”

“My son?” said Madame Romilly. “. . . My son is a fool who cannot exist away from that woman, and who sees only what she wants. . . . It’s very simple. . . . He’s just not the same man. . . . When I saw him last time I scarcely recognized him. I couldn’t talk with him. That hussy has him completely under her spell. She has been his evil genius. . . . When I think that the boy had an excellent factory and that today he should be head of it, and that he went off to bury himself in a potato field. . . . And heaven only knows what ridicule she has brought on him there in Périgord! Surely you must realize that she is not staying in the country without good reason—after all, she was used to life in Paris (and what a life!). She must have a lover hidden under some bush. . . .”

Madame Guérin waited until the Romilly daughters-in-law arrived, to enjoy their surprise and jealousy, and then left the unhappy family to sit until dinner-time discussing this latest adventure of the prodigal son.

When Madame Déodat was finally alone in her salon, she picked up an album which lay on a table, lit the lamp, and slowly looked through the pages. Pasted in them were all the photographs that she had saved for fifty years. The first pictures were of Déodat’s parents. She loved the high collars and the enormous cravats her father-in-law had worn, her mother-in-law’s crinolines. Then came Déodat at the time of their marriage, resplendent in a redingote, a tall man with

an old-fashioned moustache, a light hint of side whiskers. A little later he had let his beard grow and was very handsome. She saw him standing up holding a baby in his arms—Gaston.

She turned the pages more quickly. Now it was Gaston at all ages. He had been a gentle and precocious child. She saw him in his little dress, standing on a padded chair; in his sailor suit, leaning against the same chair; as a student in his turn-down collar; then in uniform. Then she came across the snaps which she herself had taken in the factory showing her son at work. Déodat had grumbled at her, "You shouldn't take photographs in the factory . . . It's not businesslike." But under his severe exterior, he, too, was proud of his son. . . . A beach on the Channel. Gaston in a bathing suit, between Hélène and Françoise Pascal-Bouchet. Oh, how easy it would have been for him to marry one of those two rich heiresses of the valley, if only he had wanted to! . . . Gaston as a lieutenant, the day he left for war. . . . She stopped, because she knew that from here on there were no more pictures of her eldest son in the family album. Between the triangles of her nose and chin a stalactite of tears formed silently.

The old lady sighed, wiped her tears, closed the album, then painfully went over to the oaken cabinet which covered a whole panel of the salon wall. There for fifty years she had piled empty boxes, wedding announcements, straw baskets woven by the children for birthdays, little purses embroidered with violets and mimosa, back numbers of magazines tied together in complete years. She lifted out several dusty packages and finally found a cretonne-covered box tied with a tarnished gold ribbon. In this box there was only one

grey envelope, on which she herself had written: "Photo of Valentine Gontran and of her daughter, sent by Gaston: Christmas, 1920." Madame Déodat went back to her armchair and from this envelope she drew a little brown photograph with yellowed corners. Standing on the threshold of a house with ivy-covered turrets were a pretty little girl and a blonde young woman. Then she shook her head, stood up energetically, and rang.

"You may put the covers back," she said to the maid who appeared, and, impassive as ever, she put the envelope back in its hiding-place.

21

GASTON ROMILLY, his hands in his pockets, was pacing up and down the enormous room at la Guichardie. Head bowed, face anguished, silent, he seemed to have lost his usual courtesy, seemed almost to have forgotten his hostess, who watched him anxiously from her Gothic chair, her hands lying on its arms. She had just finished telling Valentine's story, with some wise abridgements. A violent burst of anger would not have surprised her; this sombre attitude frightened her.

She repeated a second time:

"Now be calm. . . . Of course it is an unpleasant thing, but after all, it happened such a long time ago. . . . Don't forget all that your wife has meant to you for the last eighteen years. . . . And think of Colette, who knows nothing about this whole business, and who will never have to know if you don't tell

her. . . . Are you listening to me, Romilly! For the love of God, man, say something! I can't stand this."

He stopped short in front of her, looked at her sharply.

"What? What do you expect me to say to you? You have just told me a story that makes my hair stand on end, a story which is obviously false, and you want me to give you an answer."

"What do you mean, 'obviously false'?"

"Well, of course!" he cried. "Don't tell me that you believe all this? After all, you are an intelligent woman. Do you put any faith in this man who suddenly appears after twenty years of silence? In this girl whom he has never seen, and whom he suddenly chooses for his only heir?"

Madame de La Guichardie was not accustomed to being addressed so abruptly.

"Now look here, my friend, are you out of your mind? You talk as though I were romancing. . . . I believe this story because Valentine told it to me."

"And just what, exactly, does Valentine know?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders. "You yourself said at the beginning she was not sure who Colette's father really was"—(he said this in a tone of mingled bitterness and revulsion). "So why is she so sure now, years later? You tell me that she was convinced by a resemblance? Colette looks like Valentine. . . . She looks so like her that you don't need to see them together more than once to know it. . . . It's the first thing that strangers notice. . . . And so? . . . What is this melodramatic trash? . . . Why on earth does Valentine want to disturb your life and mine with these idiotic scruples?"

As Madame de La Guichardie listened to him, she was doing some rapid calculating.

"After all," she thought, "if he doesn't believe it, so much the better. . . . That's the best thing that could happen. . . . Of course! Why didn't I think of that before?"

"Listen to me, Romilly . . . Come now, be quiet for a minute, will you, and listen to me. . . . As I see it, what you have just said seems very sensible. . . . I agree with you that it is rather absurd for Valentine, who was doubtful at the time of Colette's birth, to make herself miserable twenty years later because she thinks she has seen a few traces of resemblance between an old man and a young girl. . . . In that case, the whole thing becomes very simple. Colette is your daughter. An old man, who is dead, felt compelled to leave his fortune to her. Your signature will be necessary to accept the legacy. . . . What do you intend to do?"

"How can you even ask? I shall refuse it, of course. . . . I won't accept a suspicious fortune."

"Suspicious? But you just got through assuring me that it wasn't! Really you're not making sense. . . . And besides, that's not the question. . . . It seems to me that you have no legal right to refuse it, and I find the law quite right in this matter. You have no right to go about making grandiose gestures at your daughter's expense. After all, it's really not your affair."

"No, never!" affirmed Romilly.

And he continued pacing like a caged animal. A servant came in and spoke a few words in the old lady's ear.

"Oh, all right," she replied. "That is a

. . . I told him to come Wednesday. Poor old Toury, he's getting a little vague. . . . Well, tell him I'll be right out. . . . Romilly, will you excuse me for a short time? Dr. Toury has come to give me an injection. . . . We'll continue this conversation in a few minutes. Here, let me give you a little advice: instead of storming around in this closed room, why don't you go for a walk outside in the garden? . . . You'll find me here when you get back."

22

A SHORT TIME later, Romilly, bareheaded, went out the rear gate of la Guichardie. Two sentry-boxes with crenellated tops flanked it majestically. At the right of the entrance, graven in the wall, a head had been sculptured which bore the inscription: "No more hope." The story goes that it was placed there by order of a lady of the Guichardie family who waited in vain for her son or her lover—people had forgotten just which it was. Gaston stopped a moment to look at it, then crossed the stationary bridge which spanned the moat where the old drawbridge had once stood, and followed the south side of the château. Madame de La Guichardie had had the moat levelled off here, and had planted flower gardens, for the walls kept the heat in and made this spot the warmest on the entire estate. At this season only the half-dead chrysanthemums, shrivelled by the first frosts, filled the long plots.

Romilly stopped, contemplated this picture of decay, then turned away from the château and set out toward

the trees. On the ground, the gold of the sycamores blended with the copper of the chestnut trees. At the right, through a cleverly cut clearing in the grove, he could see the village of Guichardie crouching at the foot of the château, and farther on the immense undulating plain. The sun was just setting. An incandescent glow lit up the violet clouds. Under the intense colour the village roofs gleamed a fiery red, and in the meadow the earth turned rose. Then the brilliant flame disappeared and a paler orange light enveloped the clouds and the violet faded into mauve. Gaston, who was carrying his cane, struck sharply at the glossy chestnuts which fell noiselessly among the dead leaves.

Twenty minutes later he opened the door to the room. Madame de La Guichardie was waiting for him. She had a glass of quinquina which she always drank after her injection. While she waited for Romilly, she too had been looking at the winter sunset through the window. The orange streamers were still flung across the sky, firing the tree-tops. Higher up they softened into yellow and were finally lost in an immense vault of cold, pale blue. The old lady meditated on her own life, which had been so guilty and yet so easy.

"Really," she thought to herself, "there's a lot of injustice in the world. Now here is little Valentine who, compared to me, or Cora Choin, or dozens of others, is a saint, and yet in one day her whole world may tumble in ruins. . . . And why? Because she started life under such difficult conditions that it was almost impossible for her to overcome them. . . . If she had been born 'in one of our families,' as Saviniac loves to say, she could have been ten times as indis-

creet and she would still have been accepted as a virtuous woman. . . . Well, that's life. . . ."

She was deep in this humble thought when the noise of Gaston's heavy shoes brought her back to reality. He crossed the large room quickly and sat down beside Madame de La Guichardie. She saw that his expression was grave, but calmer.

"I must ask you to excuse me," he said. "I acted like a two-year-old a little while ago."

"Why no, not at all," she replied.

"Oh yes. . . . What do you expect? It's upsetting to find one's self suddenly forced out of a retreat which has seemed safe for over fifteen years. You feel like a night bird caught in a bright light. I wanted to hide, run away from you. . . . That's all over now. . . . As soon as I got out under the trees and could feel my feet on the solid earth again, I was another man. As I walked through your gardens I thought about this story. . . . I had to admit to myself that I was just putting on an act for you. . . . I have been putting on an act for myself for fifteen years . . . an act which has undoubtedly helped me to exist because the truth was too cruel . . . but I admit that today it seems very empty. . . . Why should I pretend? Why be so stiff? It's all so simple, and we go so soon to meet death. . . . Now I am going to try to be natural. Yesterday you heard what Valentine honestly believes is the story of our life together. Now let me show you what this life has been for me."

He bowed his head, drew his hand across his eyes, and went on:

"First of all, I lied to you when I pretended to be so surprised by your revelation that I couldn't believe

it. To be perfectly frank with you, I have known for fifteen years what you have just told me. . . . That amazes you? . . . Perhaps you think that if I knew, I was wrong to pretend ignorance? . . . Wait . . . It is true that when I first met Valentine, Martin-Bussi re's part in her life was an absolute secret, and I suspected nothing. . . . Of course, I would have had to be much more ignorant of business than I was, to think that a young girl could establish such a business in Paris without heavy financial support. . . . Valentine spoke of several buyers who had known her at Rosie's and had had confidence in her; that was perfectly logical, and satisfied my curiosity. At the time when she did as I asked and liquidated her business, she herself asked me to check the accounts and dividends. Everything seemed quite regular, perfectly honest and irreproachable.

"Our marriage, a war-time marriage with no formalities, was celebrated so hurriedly that only a very few of our friends knew of it. In the following weeks gossip ran high among the women who had known Valentine. I suppose that with several of them this marriage aroused jealousy and brought back old grudges. At any rate, that is the only way that I can explain the anonymous letters which I received at the front. Human spite always horrifies me. How can people be so cruel and so low as to attack without coming into the open, how can they try to break a man's heart without even giving him an opportunity to cross-examine, to make an investigation? It's something I have never been able to understand. But the sad truth is that such individuals do exist. If I had been able to find them I think I would have killed them on the spot, without remorse or pity.

“Those letters gave Martin-Bussière’s name, and informed me that he was Colette’s father. One of them was remarkably precise. The woman who had written it (because it was a woman’s handwriting and style) pretended that she had questioned the midwife and had heard from her the story of Martin-Bussière’s visit to Valentine two weeks after Colette was born; she described a gift which he had brought, an ermine crib cover which I remembered very well. You can imagine how these details upset me; but at that time I was in the Somme, wounded, unhappy, with death threatening me at every moment. I couldn’t bring myself to break the only tie which kept me alive. I did not say anything to Valentine about these accusations; later, when I came home on leave, our joy at being together again was so great that these shameful stories seemed ridiculous to me.

“And yet, during the long years of the war, this ghastly idea would force itself upon me and haunt my dreams. It was not Valentine’s silence regarding Martin-Bussière that horrified me. From the time I first met her she never pretended that I was her first lover. . . . She had told me that I was the “first man she had ever loved”; I believed her; everything seemed to prove it, and that was enough for me. . . . No, the thing that shocked me was that she could have been so deceitful as to saddle me with the paternity of another man’s child. . . . That would have been the real trickery. . . . To dupe me, to make me ridiculous, to treat me so cruelly at the very time when my only thought was to build a happy life for her in spite of my family—that is what seemed so unworthy of Valentine. . . . And I promised myself that as soon as I

was free I would get to the bottom of this affair.

“You know what usually happens to such plans. . . . When the time came after the Armistice was declared, I was so overjoyed to be back that I had no further desire—or at least no strong desire—to take any action. . . . And as a matter of fact, how should I have gone about it? Was I to stoop to underhanded snooping among discharged cooks and vicious midwives? The idea inspired such horror in me that I decided to keep my confidence in my wife, in spite of any evidence to the contrary, as a sort of act of faith. . . . On several occasions I came close to admitting my fears to her. I think it was an instinct of self-preservation that kept me from doing so. What could she have replied? What would have happened to our life together after such a scene? My only idea was to search for proof of her love—unquestionable, unchanging—which would help me to continue believing in her.

“It was about that time that Valentine and I came to the decision for which I daily congratulate myself—we decided to live in the country and begin a new life together. How could I doubt the woman who accepted so joyfully, so serenely, the solitude which the two of us shared in this new life? How could I doubt a woman who had adored her career and who had tasted brilliant success; and yet who consented to my wish that she give up the business which she had built with her own efforts, and exchange the life of Paris for the monotony of being a farmer’s wife? As for Colette, when she was still a tiny girl of eight, she greeted my return as though I were a new and marvellous creature. I loved her. I admired her beauty which was already evident.

Not only was I happy to see that she looked like her mother, but I also discovered something more strange and delicate—something which delighted and tortured me. . . . Oh, I am sure that you must find these thoughts inhuman, even sinful; what matter? I only want to tell you the truth. . . . Well, in my love for Colette, a love almost stronger than a father's, there was an element of sadness which made the others all the stronger. The effort that I had to make at first, to rid myself of all hostile thoughts, to accord the child the tenderness she expected, had ended by imbuing this feeling with a strange, courageous character, that made it somehow rarer, more precious. . . . If an importunate idea cropped up I refused to listen to it. Soon it ceased to bother me.

“I mentioned human spitefulness. It is sometimes unbelievably ingenious and persistent. The things which I have just told you, and which played a decisive rôle in this story, go back to the first days when we were here in Périgord. When I bought Preyssac I forgot to take the precaution of checking the purity of the water. Above the spring at Vauzelles, which supplied the château with water, there was unfortunately a stagnant pool. Colette caught typhoid fever almost immediately. You know what a dreadful thing that is, not only for the patient, but also for those who are caring for her. The rising fever, the delirium . . . the sensation of the ceaseless presence of mortal danger, and when the patient is a child, the deep pity for so much gentleness, confidence, and resignation. . . . Colette went through those long weeks with angelic patience. The only thing she demanded was that I be with her as much as my work, then very heavy, would permit. She did not play, nor

even talk; she just wanted to hold my hand in her little damp fist, and she repeated over and over again: 'Daddy . . . Daddy . . . Daddy.' Even talking to you about it, I seem to feel her tiny hands, so frail and hot, still in mine.

"One morning after I had spent the whole night beside her and had finally left her at dawn when I saw that she was calmer, I found a rather thick letter in my mail. I opened it. It contained several photographs. . . . They were wrapped in a sheet of paper on which someone had typed: 'Compare these, and if you are not voluntarily blind, you will understand. . . .' I can't tell you what vulgar pictures and commentaries they bore. . . . The resemblance was obvious, unquestionable. . . . And I might add that for several years I had been surprised by the fact that although Valentine and I had always wanted other children, Valentine had never been pregnant; besides that, before I knew Valentine, none of my mistresses had ever borne a child of mine. Well, you know when you are sure of something. That morning I was convinced that Colette was not my child. But after the night I had just spent by her bedside I was in such a state of exaltation, so full of devotion, that the shock did not even touch me.

"'So be it,' I thought. 'She may not have been my child when she was born, but now she is my child a hundred times over. . . . She is my child because of last night, all the other nights before it, the life that I have perhaps given her, my daily increasing affection for her, my love.'

"And thinking of the low creature who had collected these documents and sealed the envelope, for the first

time in my life I was happy and even proud to be myself and not another."

23

MADAME DE LA GUICHARDIE was very touched by this story. She groped for her handkerchief among the innumerable objects which encumbered her lap and dropped her fan in the process. Romilly got up to give it to her. The old lady, who for a few moments had not seen her neighbour as she had always known him, looked once more at this vigorous man, with his flowing blond moustache, his rather heavy blue eyes, and was astonished to find that she had been weeping as she listened to him.

Then as Romilly, still upset, had risen and started to stride around the room, his hands shoved deep into his pockets, she remembered how in her own life she had often pretended ignorance so as not to kill an affection that she needed. . . . Sophie Ferrier . . . yes, when Sophie Ferrier had treated her so shabbily she had kept silent. She had received Sophie with a kiss as though nothing had happened. And she had not regretted it, for once her rage of jealousy had died down, Sophie Ferrier had been a faithful friend, who had died only the year before after forty-two years of sincere affection.

"Romilly," she said, "stop acting like a caged bear. . . . You've brought tears to my eyes, my friend. . . . You're a good man."

He stopped and shrugged his shoulders.

"No," he replied, "I'm just a man. . . . There's a little bit of everything in my decision. . . . Tenderness, justice . . . cowardice . . . yes, a great deal of cowardice. . . . The fear of losing the two persons that I love very dearly . . . and the certainty that I could never get along without them. . . . Oh, there were times, in the beginning, when I thought I couldn't stand these memories. . . . I suffered too much. . . . I don't know, I might have sacrificed Valentine. . . . But Colette, poor little thing, was certainly innocent. . . . And Valentine herself . . ."

He reflected a moment.

"People would undoubtedly blame me," he said. ". . . There were two or three times when I almost said something, not to upset Valentine (I loved her too much to want that), but rather to bring her closer to me, so that there might not be even the slightest hint of shadow on our life together, and to reassure her, for I knew how much she, too, was suffering. . . . Sometimes it seemed to me that this silent thought was poisoning our home, just as a foreign body can poison a wound, and that the only thing to do was to wash the wound, to cleanse it, before it could heal. . . . There were days when the temptation to do this was very strong. . . . About two years ago . . . no, a little longer than that: it was around the time of the Montal marriage . . . Colette came back from Périgueux one evening with some samples of material for a dress, and among the scraps that the girl handed her, Valentine found one of Martin-Bussière's. . . . What did she think? Was she upset by this name? I don't know, but she flew into a rage, something so unjust and so foreign to her character that even Colette noticed it. . . . That

evening I almost said: 'My poor darling, don't fret that way, I know everything. . . .' Then, I was afraid that I might do more harm than good . . . that a conversation on this subject would only lead to a thousand others . . . and that these discussions of the past—vain, unpleasant—do more than anything else to undermine our life. . . . And above all, I thought that Colette, who is such an acute observer, would probably notice them. . . . When I was a young man in Pont-de-l'Eure I had known a case almost similar to my own. . . . A young woman had had a child by her brother-in-law and had admitted it to her husband. . . . He had forgiven her, but I had an unsavoury memory of this tragic family, whose story was common gossip in the entire village; and of the little girl, whom all her friends in school watched with such ill-concealed curiosity that she soon guessed its cause. . . . I told myself that if I could possibly do it, my duty was to preserve Colette from such a fate, and that the first step toward hiding it was my own silence. . . . And so I said nothing. . . . Did I do wrong? Who can say? And anyway, what does it matter? Life is so difficult. . . ."

Across Madame de La Guichardie's mind floated the memory of many old stories. How many scruples she had had when Mathilda had come and thrown herself at her feet, begging her to give her back her husband, and when the husband had sworn that he would kill himself if she did. She had taken the risk and left him. He did not kill himself . . . and now both Mathilda and her husband were dead a good twenty years. . . . She herself was an old woman. . . . Yes, he was right, this boy; life is difficult when you are still young enough to be torn by passions.

"Well, now, what are you going to do?" she demanded. "And what am I supposed to tell Valentine?"

"That's what I was trying to decide while I was walking under your chestnut trees." His voice was now quite calm. "I am sure that for Colette as well as for myself it would be better to refuse this fortune. The only thing is, I don't know if it is legally possible. A friend of mine is one of the best lawyers in Bordeaux. I'll go down and see him this week."

He came back to his seat near the old lady and leaned toward her:

"Whatever the legal solution may be, there is one thing which I wish you would ask of Valentine for me, and that is that she never brings up this story, that she continues to live beside me as she has always done, and that she forgets the whole thing."

"That's all very fine, my friend," said Madame de La Guichardie, "but how do you want Valentine to act when you get home about an hour from now? She knows that we have just had this talk. . . . She is waiting anxiously for your judgment. . . . She is imagining all sorts of dramas; she is convinced that you are going to throw the two of them out, her and Colette. . . . After all, you will have to reassure her when you get home."

"Has she said anything to Colette?" he asked quickly.

"Have you gone out of your mind? Nothing, of course. That goes without saying."

"In that case, it's very simple . . . I would like to have you 'phone her before I get home. . . . You will tell her the truth; that I know, that I have known for a long time, and that I ask her to meet me in a

little while as though I were coming back from a walk. . . . Why should we play a melodramatic scene of revelation when there has been no revelation? . . . You see, I often thought about that. . . . I am a great walker, and almost every day I spend some time in the woods. . . . I examine my life, the lives of others. Well, it seems to me that the best part of our misfortunes—our moral unhappiness, I mean—comes from the fact that we have words to describe them. . . . We give them body, we even go so far as to give them a body which is not their own, for the words of common language do not always correspond to our sufferings, which may be of a new and distinct sort. . . . And then, too, words prolong and preserve sorrows that should long have been forgotten. Animal nature forgets. . . . Take my own case: yes, there has been a frightful tragedy in my life; but because it has always remained silent it is almost foreign to me by now. . . . And now I should bring it to life? Should I begin a mournful dialogue between Valentine and me, a dialogue that would probably not end until we die? . . . Why? Why torture each other? Six feet of ground contain all the mortal remains of Martin-Bussièrre. . . . Six feet of ground will one day contain . . .”

“Be still!” exclaimed Madame de La Guichardie, who hated to hear anyone speak of death. . . . “If everyone reasoned like you, we’d go a long way.”

“At least we would be ourselves, instead of living and suffering for the image which others make of us. . . . Suppose that tomorrow I were to throw Valentine out, Valentine whom I love and who loves me, that I were to send her away from Preyssac in a

scene of theatrical violence. Valentine may have done wrong twenty years ago, but she is no longer the same woman, and she scarcely remembers the things she did then, or the reasons for them. . . . Why should I do this senseless, cruel thing, except perhaps for my 'honour,' just to show how pitiless I can be and to prove to you and some notary from Lyons what a strong man I am."

"I think you are right," she said. "But what about Colette? Are you sure that you can treat Colette as you always have?"

"Oh, there again we have much rhetoric and verbiage. . . . Don't you think that there is probably a closer bond between Colette and me than between her and Martin-Bussièrre? . . . I told you a little while ago how, when she was ill, she called for me. . . . Well, I was also the first person to tell her the stories that made her laugh and cry. . . . For ten years I was the person who listened to her tell what had happened during the day. . . . I am the first to guess what she is going to say before she opens her mouth to speak. . . . And yet she is less my child than the child of that old man who met her once in a roadside hotel and who turned away to pay his bill after a few words? Well, really, now!"

Through her lorgnette, Madame de La Guichardie looked with a mixture of sympathy and irony at this ordinarily silent man. For two full hours he had been talking with an intensity of feeling because a vital part of his life had been threatened. When he finally stopped, she assured him that she agreed with him and went to arrange for Valentine to receive him as he desired on his return.

24

THROUGH the windows of his little car Gaston Romilly watched the towers of la Guichardie fade into the night. The moonlight made crisp shadows which emphasized all the more the lovely lines of the roofs, the gables, and the cupolas. Along the side of the road, willows and poplars seemed hardly real in a supernatural light. The meadows, bathed in liquid clearness, looked like pools, and the bushes emerged like aquatic growths. Light scarfs of mist floated around the flanks of the hills. Driving carefully, Romilly thought of the conversation which he had just had with his old friend.

"She must have found me ridiculous. . . . Well, that can't be helped. . . . I have no regrets. . . . Did I even hesitate between the two possibilities? . . . No, I reacted like any man would who sees his very existence attacked and who flees the danger zone. . . . That's the only way we can live."

Approaching headlights blinded him for an instant and he slowed down. To the right of the road he could see windows shining brightly; it was the home of a peasant named Godefroy whom he admired for the perfection of his farm. The previous summer he had brought Colette up here so that she could study it. With this thought his mind turned again to Colette and he seemed to see her as the tiny little girl he found when he arrived in a blue uniform and she was afraid of this strange soldier. "Nicol-colette" she had then replied when anyone asked her name. She had been named Nicole, but everyone had forgotten by now.

After the Godefroy farm the road dipped toward the Loue Valley. At this time of night in the fall, the lowlands were submerged by the fogs. He had the sensation of going straight down into a white lake from which only the very tips of the trees escaped.

"How hard it is to be sincere," he thought, stepping on the brakes. "I tried so very hard just a little while ago, and yet how far I was from saying everything. . . . And that horrible day when I went to see my mother again at Pont-de-l'Eure . . ."

By now he could see nothing but the luminous ribbons projected by the headlights and the halo surrounding them. This light called to mind the orange roofs of the factories at Pont-de-l'Eure, the elbow in the river, and the circle of hills. . . . How stiff his mother had been when he had seen her after his father's death! He had tried to reach her heart by speaking of Colette's health, which was then poor.

"Oh, no," she had almost sneered, "you don't really intend to torment me with tales of *that* child! "

He had understood so well what she meant that he had not even replied. But what sorrow! What humiliation! He had been haunted by those words which kept him awake the whole night. . . . Everything at the funeral had struck such a false note. He had heard old Pascal-Bouchet, who had cordially loathed Déodat Romilly for seventy years, murmur to the widow:

"Ah, Madame, I have lost my oldest and dearest friend."

The divorced wife of his brother Louis had come,

pretending to forget the quarrels they had had before his father's death, anxious to find out if the will would make it possible for her to demand higher alimony. . . . And to Gaston himself, his mother had repeated several times the sad reproach:

"Your father's greatest sorrow was not seeing you once more before his death. . . ."

"What a lie," he had thought. "My father was ill for six months; if he had been so anxious to see me, it would have been very easy to send for me; I would have come."

Bitterly he had compared this vain and tiresome comedy that his family was playing to the uneventful life which he led at the edge of his forest, with Valentine and Colette. The day after the funeral he had had a very disagreeable conversation with Maître Pelletot, the notary at Pont-de-l'Eure, whom he had gone to consult in order to set things in order.

"Monsieur Gaston," the old notary had said, "I must warn you that your mother is very displeased with you. . . . Perhaps you are thinking that I am butting into something which is none of my business. . . . But, you know how interested I have been in your family for over forty years. . . . I would be only too happy if I could bring about a reconciliation between Madame Déodat and her eldest son. . . . Don't you think it would be better to talk the whole thing over with her openly and simply? Please note, Monsieur Gaston, that I am not taking sides with either your mother or you, but I do think it my duty to tell you what she said to me: 'Gaston exasperates me,' Madame Déodat said. 'Granted that he married his mistress, since he pretends that she

can make him happy. But to expect *me* to receive her illegitimate daughter—that's going a little too far. . . . I am very well informed about all their stories. I have made my little inquiries. . . . Maître Pelletot,' she added, 'I shall ask you to make the distribution of my possessions among my granddaughters while I am still alive. I will not have that creature, who is *nothing* to us, wearing my laces and my rings.' As for me, Monsieur Gaston, I assured her that I would have no part in a spoliation, and besides, she was suggesting facts which are always difficult to prove. . . . Nevertheless I thought it might be well for you to know. . . ."

How had he managed to keep silent when he returned to his home? Once again some instinct stronger than sorrow, stronger than the need of knowing had closed his mouth. . . . But the following day he had looked at Colette long and searchingly, with a bitter detachment. What would she have looked like if she had been Valentine's and his child? More vigorous, undoubtedly, less delicate; yet what a joy it would have been to find united in another person the characteristics that he loved in Valentine blended with his own. . . . He had sighed, and the ever-attentive Valentine had asked:

"Is something wrong? . . . You don't look well. This trip has tired you. . . ."

And he had invented one of his attacks. Life is strange. . . .

Was this the slope up to Preyssac already? Yes, there was the triangular clump of pines, their black silhouette piercing the grey mist. He took the turn without thinking about it, with the marvellous precision that comes from long habit, and shifted into

second. The road had been planned some three or four centuries earlier, for horses, not for motor-cars, and it was very narrow. Already he was coming out of the lake of fog. Under the bright light of the headlights lay the moonlit green of the meadows, the red line of the vines cutting across them. Five minutes later he went into the house. He was not without a secret apprehension, but he betrayed it by no outward sign. He was happy to find Valentine with Colette; no scene was possible.

"Hello," said Valentine gaily. "Have any trouble on the road?"

"No," he said, "no trouble. . . . Oh, I know those turns down to the last inch. . . . I can take them without even seeing them. . . ."

Colette, who had stood up, came to kiss him.

"Oh, you're cold. . . . Is there a frost? It was so lovely at four."

After a moment's hesitation she asked:

"And what did Madame de La Guichardie want with you?"

She had been a little uneasy all afternoon, afraid that they might be talking about her marriage and that perhaps something had come up that they had not expected.

"Oh, nothing much," he said very naturally. ". . . You know that she wants to install electricity at *la Guichardie*. She wants me to see the section engineer with her because she doesn't understand all those technicalities. Fortunately, it's not very complicated."

"Did she give you something good to eat?"

"For heaven's sake," he laughed, "I didn't even think of it. . . . To tell you the truth I don't think she gave me anything."

His anxiety was disappearing. Everything was so simple, so easy. He went up to his room to take off his shoes and came downstairs a quarter of an hour later when he heard the dinner bell. During dinner he in turn questioned Colette:

"And you, what did you do all day? I suppose you wrote an eighteen-page letter to André?"

"Not at all," she said. "I walked up to Brouillac with the dogs."

"And what are the Malardeaus doing these days? I haven't been up there lately."

"Marie and her daughter were shelling chestnuts, and then I helped them tie up their bags of nuts. . . . Do you know, they're going to make more from their nuts this year than from their wheat? . . . It's simply amazing. . . . When I have Breuilh I shall plant walnut trees. . . ."

"Be careful, that's only a fad."

Valentine mentioned a letter which she had received that morning.

"It's still Marcel Gontran. . . . He is impossible. . . . His little prune business is bankrupt. . . . They have lost their furniture, once again. . . ."

"Do you think it's true?" asked Gaston. "They invent a story like this three times a year."

"Yes, I know," said Valentine, "but it's nearly always true. . . . They are extraordinary people. . . . As soon as Jeanne Marcel has one penny to rub against another she buys dresses, gramophone records . . . and then, of course, everything collapses and they write to me."

"Oh, send them a thousand francs," said Gaston.

"Five hundred will be quite enough," answered Valentine. "There's always time . . ."

After dinner they sat before the fire in the big room. Valentine loved to light an enormous wood fire and see the flames flickering like a flag waving in the wind. The heat was so intense that they had to protect their faces against it. Valentine sat in the armchair on the right, Gaston on the left, and Colette was perched on a stool near her father. Sometimes, father and daughter would play chess together, but this evening they both preferred reading. Since her engagement Colette had developed an absorbing interest in novels because André wrote about them in his letters. Gaston Romilly was reading an article in an agricultural journal on raising snails. The author had managed to bring in some ingenious observations regarding the personality and habits of these animals. "If one wants the snails to feel that they are at liberty in their park and so produce more prolifically than ordinarily, it is indispensable to keep them in well-composed landscapes, thus giving them an impression of variety and fantasy."

He was going to read this sentence, which he found highly amusing, to the two women, but when he raised his eyes, he saw that they were both completely absorbed. Valentine was knitting a beige sweater with brown stripes and was counting under her breath.

"Purl five, knit two, skip one, knit two, purl five. Purl five . . ."

For a long time he watched them without saying a word.

"Nothing is changed," he thought. "Nothing will ever change. . . . With more pride and less love, I could so easily have lost both of them."

And yet there was still a small hurt deep down in the wound: the knowledge that Valentine had tried to

hide her closest thought from him. Why had she never spoken? Through the drawn blinds a bright light struck the ceiling. Gaston unconsciously noted to himself that a car had stopped in front of the Chardeuil post office. He recalled a lovely evening on the terrace, with glow-worms spangling the grass, shooting stars streaking through the heavens, the children standing by the bench, and Valentine silent beside him. That evening, after he came back from Breuilh, he had said to his wife:

"Colette and I had quite a chat on the ride home. . . . She's really delightful."

And suddenly he had guessed, through an almost imperceptible trembling, that Valentine was thinking, "Poor Gaston." For Valentine herself was sometimes a prey to a fleeting weakness and could not help being triumphant at the thought of what she took for her husband's blindness. At such times he could see a tender fugitive irony in her eyes. How many thoughts exist thus between human beings, too fine for words, but real, dangerous, like some minute organism, so small that it can only be seen under a very strong microscope and whose presence is only revealed by the pain which it can cause.

Several times he had been so hurt that he thought it would kill him. And was it not possible that his frequent imaginary attacks were due to the need of creating some vaster drama to efface a too unhappy past?

At this moment Valentine raised her eyes and finding him so solemn, started anxiously. But he smiled at her and she knew that he still loved her.

"How brave and good he is," she thought. ". . . For twenty years he has carried this terrible secret without a question, without a reproach. . . . Nothing

in his attitude could ever have aroused the slightest doubt, the faintest suspicion in Colette's mind. . . . He has even accepted the ridiculous rôle of playing the fool in my eyes when actually he was no such thing. . . . How wonderful to know that at last this battle is over! "

In the fireplace the branches were going up in bright sparks; now the great logs were catching fire and their flames, less noisy, rose gently. Colette, roused from her reading by this brilliant display, changed position slightly, and seeing that her parents were happy, although she did not quite know why, she watched them lovingly.

"Whatever was I afraid of?" thought Valentine.

She opened her lips to speak, but felt herself numbed as though under a spell.

"Oh, dear; I dropped a stitch," she murmured.

And she leaned over her work.

